

**ROSH HASHANAH MORNING**  
**Thursday, September 29, 2011**

I did something unusual this past spring. At least it was unusual for me.

I went to the Metropolitan Opera to hear a performance of Richard Wagner's "Die Walkurie." For many, Wagner is the quintessential anti-Semite. Wagner is banned, by common agreement, in Israel.

I went for several reasons. First, I had never heard a performance of this opera before. James Levine was scheduled to conduct, but alas, he did not. I wanted to see the huge mechanical set. But also, there were great singers performing that night. Jonas Kaufmann, Deborah Voigt, Bryn Terfel, and Stephanie Blythe.

I joined an audience of lots of Jews, some of whom seemed as ambivalent about being there as I. Professor Stephen Greenblatt of Harvard quipped that Jews were to be seen at "Die Walkurie" eating whitefish salad on bagels in the intermission, almost as an act of atonement.

But I went for another reason. As many of you know from listening to me over these many years, I have a particular interest in folklore.

Wagner brings to life on stage a full panoply of Teutonic gods and goddesses. Wotan, Wagner's chief god, is a character beset by ambivalence. First, he sees in his creations, his children Sigmund and Sieglinde, a mirror of himself. He has the nauseating recognition of what he had wrought.

While the Christian God sacrifices his only son, Wotan, in the end, sacrifices both his son and his daughter. This was the pattern of ancient religions, all of them. The ancient Roman poet Lucretius reminds us that all religions are inherently cruel, and that they always demand the sacrifice of their children.

And yet, as our Torah portion makes it very clear, Jews don't sacrifice their children. The writer of the Torah creates a scenario in which the message of Abraham is "No, do not do what is common, the prevailing notion."

## I. CONVERSATIONS WITH GOD

To a very large degree, the sacrifice of children is part of the ancient world's understanding of what dialogue with God means. In a sense, ancient believers thought that sacrifice was a way of getting the gods' attention, of showing faith, so that the gods would return the favor and be gracious to us.

This tit-for-tat notion of communication with God, "you do this for me and I will do that for you" is something that Judaism ran away from 3,000 years ago and more.

But this has been a tough battle. Everywhere we turn, we find evidence of people still demanding a relationship with God, which smacks of a relationship with a father, whom we really don't understand, but whom we try to please with varying devices of appeasement, of bribes.

And just in case our efforts of appeasement with our complicated and cranky father fail, we appeal to our mother for intercession. Perhaps she will prevail on our father to look with more compassion or favor on our requests.

And sometimes our father does things that are incomprehensible. It's as if he just tries to remind us just who is the boss. An occasional earthquake or a flood will do the trick to remind us who really is in charge.

There are many people in the world, even in the educated West, who accept with whole heart this formulation of the relationship with the deity.

When watching “De Walkurie,” or any other Wagner opera for that matter, these relationships play themselves out on the stage in full measure.

Frankly, I am not prepared to offer the notion that Wagner was spoofing the religious world in which he lived. Was he showing us the irritability of his gods as a commentary on the theology of his time.

Who knows?

But the Rabbis who lives before and after Wagner were much more sophisticated, more nuanced in their thinking than most of the other religionists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## II. WHAT CAN WE PRAY FOR?

Many, many years ago, when I was a rabbinic student at the Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati, I was asked to teach a sixth grade class on prayer in the religious school of the Isaac M. Wise Temple. There were very few materials available at that time. (Perhaps so even now.)

Yes, there were books that discussed different Hebrew prayers, emphasizing the language. But there was nothing that I really needed. With the energy of 20-year-old, who thought he could do anything, I decided to write a book. I called it “Adventures in Prayer,” and in it I sought to bring home the essence of prayer to 11-year-olds through stories to which they could relate.

I had to deal with the whole question of “intercessory” prayer. Specifically what could I pray for, what could I, in my communication with God, ask for.

I immediately chose the weather as a good topic, easy to understand for sixth graders. We are planning a picnic for the week-end, can I pray for good weather? Or a Little League game. I juxtaposed the needs of the farmer, who was facing almost drought-like conditions. To whom would, or should, God listen.

Frankly, I was taking on the very difficult theology of Moses Maimonides, a 12<sup>th</sup> century physician and Jewish scholar, whom we were studying at the Hebrew Union College. Maimonides, or Rambam as he is colloquially known among Jews, was asserting several centuries later, the highly rational philosophy of Aristotle. Rambam asserted that God was the First Cause, that he set the world in motion. He eschewed the

idea that God was a tinkerer, and would change the course of the universe on a whim, or in response to a punctiliously performed sacrifice or a particularly poignant request from a worshipper.

He even went on to assert that there were no miracles. Those few that we read about in the Torah were built into Creation, and would never occur again.

I think you will agree with me that Maimonides is pretty sophisticated stuff, even for today. Imagine, if you will, the response 800 or more years ago.

So, this is what I was teaching to sixth graders, almost 50 years ago. And I am still teaching it today.

Indeed, I believe that it is just as important to teach this kind of theology in 2011, when much of the religionists of the world are still mired in the notion that God speaks to them, and instructs them to do things, things that are misreadings of religion, or even destructive in our world.

### III. SO, WHAT CAN WE PRAY FOR? (OR WHY GO TO SERVICES?)

I believe that there are many reasons for us to attend services, and one of them is NOT to please rabbis and cantors, whose business it is to bring people to worship services.

First, I align myself with the late Harry Golden. Harry Golden was a Jewish folk philosopher who lived in North Carolina half a century ago. He published a weekly newspaper called the "Carolina Israelite." It was largely filled with his musings about current events, and other topics that interested him.

He was well known as an agnostic or free thinker. But he was a regular attendee at Shabbat morning worship. When he was challenged about his seemingly contradictory attendance at services and his free-thinking about God, he replied in this way. "Mr. Epstein goes to shul to speak to God; I go to speak to Epstein."

What Harry Golden was alluding to, and we still need it today, is the idea of community. The notion that in our craziness of living in the world today, we need relationships, friends and colleagues, to whom we can relate, to whom we speak.

I believe that this is equally true for Jews and Christians. Most Christians I know hardly go to church for the theology espoused there. They go either for the music and/or for their friends.

Second, we Jews need to continue to study, and the synagogue functions beautifully in this regard. In case you hadn't noticed, more than 50% of our services revolve about learning and

study. The reading of our Torah portion this morning and the sermon explaining it are the largest part of our worship experience. Our neighbors the Muslims got this from us, and they do it better than we do. The actual worship portion of the Friday morning prayers in mosques contains several short invocations to God. They comes the reading from the Qur'an and the sermon. That's it.

(Christians generally retained more rituals taken from our common pagan ancestors, than from the Jews.)

Third, the liturgy of the synagogue contains very few requests of God. The rabbis of ancient days thought that we should give God a break on Shabbat, and not bother him with our petty demands. The Jewish liturgy places us in a historical context, reminds us of the traditional values of the Jewish people, and urges us to strive to bring our lives into comportment with those values.

I believe that these are enough reasons to see all of us in the synagogue regularly.

## CONCLUSION

It is interesting how seeing the Metropolitan Opera's production of Wagner's "Die Walkurie" stimulated so many of my thoughts this morning. Perhaps seeing Wagner's gods and goddesses on the stage spoke to me in a different way from it did to most of those attending the opera.

I don't know enough about Wagner's thinking to assert that Richard Wagner was satirizing contemporary religion. But if we do read it that way, along with enjoying the magnificent music, it may help us to understand the biblical story of the Binding of Isaac.

Might not that to be a satire on the religion of that moment in history, or even OUR moment in history!!!!