

Thank you for letting me speak here this morning. The reason I requested this opportunity is that I'm a spiritually engaged atheist, and I spend a lot of time talking and writing about what that means. I don't know how many other atheists, agnostics are here besides me, but I'm sure I'm not the only one who sometimes recites a prayer or hears a passage of Torah and wonders, "What am I doing here? I don't believe all this. Even if I did believe in God, it wouldn't be one who acts like this, who demands prayers like this." And, yet, here we are, the atheists and agnostics among us, for one reason or another.

I came to spirituality through a 12-Step program for food addiction. Six years ago I was 115 lbs. heavier, depressed, and hopeless. Through the 12-Step program I lost all that weight and experienced a kind of spiritual awakening. Rabbi Seidel said to me in helping prepare this talk that after the high holidays some people may be left with a feeling of discouragement about whether they can really change and become the people they strive to be, and it can be inspiring to hear from someone who has been able to do that. I definitely don't want to put myself forward as a model of Jewish or spiritual or even atheist virtue. But anyone who knew me six years ago when I weighed 270 lbs. can see the change in me. Around at least one of my bad habits I wear dramatic evidence of my transformation on my body every day--which inspires me to continue working on other moral aspirations. So, as far as it's possible for me to share any of that, I will try.

Judaism has a complex relationship with belief. Skepticism, questioning, God-wrestling are central to our tradition. The orthodoxy asked, even of the orthodox, is generally more of practice than of belief. The fact that I'm standing here right now is clear evidence that skeptics and atheists are welcome in this congregation. But when the skeptics among us attend services or engage in prayers and rituals, what do we think we're doing? If we're not, according to our beliefs, obeying the commandments of an actual God, what's the point? This week's parsha is about the Covenant, which is a perplexing arrangement even if you do believe in God. But if the other party to this contract is a figment of our cultural imagination, how are we supposed to conceive of our duties and obligations, our rights and benefits?

If you try to read the contract literally or in any kind of straightforward or simplistic way, I don't think the believers here will be any more comfortable with it than the atheists. Are their transactions with God a simple quid pro quo? Does God pay for their devotion and good behavior by giving them special treats? Do they expect a 5% return on tzedakah? If they can't rely on rewards for being good people, are they going to say forget it and become brigands, libertines, or psychopaths?

You can certainly find atheists who will caricature religious belief in this way, but that's really not how it works. Most mature, modern believers would be offended at the idea that God is buying them off with goodies.

For all of us, I would venture to say, religious observance and ethical behavior are not the price we're willing to pay for the benefits we're promised under the terms of the covenant. Our moral commitments are not the unfortunate price of admission; on the contrary, they're the thing we're buying! Well, we already had moral commitments, but we come to shul to get

more, or to spruce up the ones we have, or to find support for fulfilling them, or to be in the company of others who share them. Being good people is not the sacrifice we make in exchange for certain rewards, it *is* the reward.

But that, by itself, also can't explain what we're doing here, neither the atheists nor the believers. If all we wanted from our religious practice was to bolster and support our moral commitments and to get help passing these to our children, there are more efficient ways to go about it.

There's another congregation up the street a couple blocks, the Washington Ethical Society, part of a movement, as it happens, founded by a humanist rabbi a hundred and forty years ago, to satisfy exactly that need: for a religious community to strengthen and provide support for our natural moral inclinations. The moral lessons taught there, the commitment to social justice, to environmental responsibility, it's all pretty similar to what we find here. Except for them it's all a lot more straightforward: it's all presented in plain English; no millennia-old prayers, no God issuing commandments and making awkward promises to smite the faithful's enemies.

But here we not only have our religion wrapped in 3000-year-old scripture and customs that can jar the moral sensibilities of a modern person, we also have the moral parts all mixed up with things that don't make that much moral sense to us. Don't kill, don't steal: OK. But thou shalt have no other gods and remember Shabbat and keep it holy: for atheists at least, these don't sound like moral imperatives. Show kindness to strangers, don't do to others that which you despise: great. But don't mix milk and meat, put mezuzahs on your doors: these mark us out as Jews; they don't have any obvious relevance to our moral commitments. If all we wanted out of our religion was to be good, moral people, we could go up the street to WES. But when we come here and engage in all these practices and rituals that seem to have nothing to do with morality as we understand it, something a bit mysterious is going on.

One thing that could keep us here is the value of our cultural heritage, our bond as a people. We need to keep having Seders because otherwise we'll forget we're Jewish and disappear into the general population. But whether or not we feel the preservation of our culture and religion is a moral imperative, our religious practices ought to work for us on a personal scale as well.

God tells Abraham in this week's parsha, "This is My covenant, which you shall observe between Me and between you and between your seed after you, that every male among you be circumcised." This is not just some quaint Jewish custom like eating bagels. We cut off a part of the body of our eight-day-old sons. This is maybe the single most powerful symbol of the covenant. But there are those who consider it a serious moral evil: a painful and irreversible operation on an unconsenting infant. No matter how strongly we reject that position, we can't deny that the practice raises real moral questions. New Atheists like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins get a lot of traction on this kind of thing. Religion claims to be central to our moral lives, and then it make demands that ignore or even go against our moral sensibilities.

What I'd like to argue, based on my direct experience, is that the ostensibly senseless things we do in the course of religious practice *do*, or at least can, play a vital, powerful role in our moral metabolism.

My moral capacities, as I understand them, are extremely fickle. Depending on my mood, how tired I am, my stress level, my comfort or anxiety in particular situations or around particular people, my ability to act in ways that reflect my moral convictions, can fluctuate drastically. Those of us who engage in creative endeavors know how fleeting and unreliable sparks of originality or creative energy can be. We can imagine capricious muses offhandedly bestowing or withholding the creative inspiration we need in artistic work. Moral capacities can wax and wane with the same mysteriousness, within a certain range, at least. As a competent musician can always play a memorized piece with reasonable facility, there may be a moral baseline below which we seldom if ever sink. That baseline is generally set by nature and nurture in childhood. My best day could seem sordid and depraved compared to the worst day of a tzaddik. And my worst day might serve as an unattainable ideal for a scoundrel. But between the poles of my own moral disposition, I can glory in the righteous radiance of benevolent acts, or I can flog myself for my craven disregard for others and my pitiable indulgence in various vices.

Most of the time we float in some neutral zone far from the poles, and most of life's demands don't seem to be of a moral nature. But we will at times be tested. When my three-year-old is screaming her head off at my suggestion that she give the cupcake she just grabbed off her brother's plate back to him, and my patience has already been worn thin by her last three fits, that's when I need the moral muses to come to my aid. I'm as likely at such a moment to spontaneously compose the central motif of a brilliant symphony as I am to free my son's cupcake from my daughter's clutches in a loving and gentle manner.

Atheist or not, the idea that I would act ethically in order to appease God so God will grant my desires is totally backward. Somewhere in my soul or unconscious mind moral squalls are blowing and affecting the moods, patience, generosity, and other weather on my surface. I already want to be a good person; I want you to think I'm a good person, I want *me* to think I'm a good person; I want good things for my family and everyone around me; but just as our prescientific ancestors found themselves at the mercy of overwhelming and incomprehensible natural forces, we find ourselves at the mercy of our own mysterious minds. Reasoned argument works against my bad habits and selfish or irrational urges about as well as it works on my 3-year-old. A fickle or vengeful God is actually a pretty good model for the forces I need to appease in my toddler daughter or in my intransigent self. But moral action is not the means of appeasement, it's the goal. Being a good person isn't the means to an end. But when I'm beset with urges and compulsions that work against these good intentions, noble resolutions are pointless--the time has come for oblation, superstition, ritual sacrifice, dramatic gestures of devotion.

For me, my diet isn't a diet, it's a religious observance. I weigh my meals precisely on digital scale never going one tick above or below the dictates of my food plan. Is an eighth of an ounce or an occasional dessert going to make me fat? Of course not. But for me it would be a kind of sacrilege. My 12-step program involves a long list of rituals, practices and sometimes pointless sacrifices, including daily prayers to a God I don't believe exists. When I make a sacrifice for the sake of my spiritual practice, there is one thing I always get in return: proof

that I am devoted enough to do it. Getting that proof, when I pay attention to it, does something to me; it taps into moral reserves that had been laying dormant underground. From Pirkei Avot: "Ben Azzai would say: Run to pursue a minor mitzvah, and flee from a transgression. For a mitzvah brings another mitzvah, and a transgression brings another transgression. For the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah, and the reward of transgression is transgression."

The covenant seems to lump all the commandments together. And there's a temptation, especially for us skeptics, to throw out the parts that don't make moral sense. As moderns we want to drape our ancient religion in midrash and whitewash away the jealous and vengeful God demanding senseless sacrifices and devotions. But irrational forces are still alive inside us.

Maybe the reason we atheists and agnostics find ourselves still struggling with the mysteries of religious observance is that we sense some wisdom here. A simplistic reading has a bully God buying our devotion and good behavior with promises of land and offspring. But maybe what we are being offered is a chance to appease the jealous, vengeful gods inside us; and when they're appeased, our reward is a capacity for good behavior, for clarity and decency. *Sometimes*, at least, we feel better after performing our religious observances, making our ritual sacrifices. When we don't, maybe it's because we haven't demanded the goods we've paid for under the terms of the covenant. Satirists can mock the religious buying a feeling of righteousness with their pointless oblations. But the truly religious know that a feeling of righteousness is not meant to serve as a platform for holier-than-thou condescension--it's a rickety structure, a temporary scaffolding, giving us just enough support to perform a few good works we might not have been able to do otherwise, to be more decent than we could left to our own devices.

In this view, the covenant is an intrapsychic transaction. In Freudian terms, the ego bargains with the id and superego, maybe. In this transaction, you go to the altar with your precious offering, you perform some pointless observance, you appease the mysterious forces, you awaken to a moral strength that had seemed inaccessible, and then you go into the world warm in the glow of righteousness, full of the moral energy to do the next right thing.