Religious Freedom and Interreligious Encounter

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In Australia in the year 2019, Jews are probably freer than we have been any time in our entire diasporic existence of 2000 years. Though there are occasional acts of an anti-Semitic nature, by and large the Jewish community does not feel existentially threatened by these incidents. No Jew feels prevented from practicing their religion as they see fit. We do not feel coerced into behaving in a certain manner which is contrary to our beliefs, nor do we feel the need to conform to a set of standards in religion which is not natural to us.

Jews may speak of this freedom as being a double-edged sword. It allows us to observe the tenets of our faith without restrictions or inhibitions; but it may also be understood to encourage a level of assimilation to a civil "Australian culture" beyond what we have previously experienced. Be this as it may, it is undeniable that this freedom promotes the interaction of Jews with non-Jews to a degree unheard of in earlier ages.

Engaging with those of different faith traditions and ways of life has become the norm rather than exceptional behaviour. We meet people of other persuasions and religions every day, on the street, in the shops, at school or work, in coffee houses and restaurants, on sports fields and in places of entertainment. This is a central feature of religious freedom in our society, and it is the case in similar societies around the world. There are Jewish communities in certain countries globally that do not enjoy this freedom, but we in Australia certainly do. It is the reality for us.

Speaking mainly of the European scene, a little more than 200 years ago this was not the situation. Partly by choice and partly by the will of the authorities, Jews generally lived in urban ghettoes or in villages set apart for Jewish settlement. They did not mix more than was necessary with the non-Jewish population, and they knew little if anything about people who practiced other religions or ways of life. Religious freedom was not a feature of societies.

This all changed with Napoleon. In his efforts to create an empire with a unified political and cultural identity, the origins of the modern nation-state, he welcomed all religious groups to participate as equal citizens so long as they agreed to accept the standards of the state in matters of a civil nature. In 1807 Napoleon called upon an assembly of rabbis, which he labelled "the Sanhedrin," to answer certain questions about the character of Judaism in order to determine whether the Jewish community would be able to overcome their apartness (what we today might refer to as their "otherness") and participate as equals in this grand civic design. [There is a succinct account of this process and its significance for religious freedom in Sidney Schwarz, Judaism and Justice: the Jewish passion to repair the world, Vermont 2006, pp.14-15.] The answers supplied by the rabbis ultimately opened the Jewish community up to the wider universe of religions, as we encounter diverse religious traditions today.

Of course, we now know that the route to religious freedom is not straightforward. The Jews of Germany at the beginning of the 1930s thought they were experiencing the most perfect freedom that the world had ever seen. This illusion was shattered by the Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht) and the Shoah that followed. This was a period of absolute subjugation and degradation for the Jewish people across Europe. The freedom that we experience today is, in part, a reaction to this degradation, the response of our society to a terrifying phase in human history.

But, having acknowledged the religious freedom that we now enjoy, what do we do with it? How do we weigh it in the balance of human history? Asking these questions from a Jewish perspective, I would like to offer a twofold reply: first, a scriptural comment; and then, a

theological comment. I am hoping that these two comments will contribute towards an authentically Jewish understanding of the meaning of religious freedom and interreligious encounter.

First, a scriptural response. I have read countless discussions by rabbis and scholars on the Jewish people in an age of freedom, and one Biblical passage appears time and again in relation to the reality of religious pluralism. It is the passage from the story of Creation at the start of the book of Genesis that describes the creation of Adam (man/mankind/humanity), that Adam was created "in the image of God" (in the divine image: b'tzelem Elohim). It is hugely important that the passage uses the term adam. This is a claim about all of humankind. Every person is created in God's image, not only Jews but people of all faiths and traditions. Whatever we may understand by "in God's image", it encompasses all people equally and unites us as a single "humanity". Jewish teaching, then, puts forward the idea that religious freedom is bound up with awareness that we share an intrinsic nature, that we all carry God's image in our make-up as human beings.

It is appropriate that we talk of these matters at this time in the yearly cycle. We stand on the cusp of Rosh Hashana, the beginning of a new year according to the Jewish rite and a major moment of gathering within the Jewish community. Rabbi Harold Schulweis (lived 1925-2014), one of the leading Conservative rabbis of the 20th century, taught this insight about the new year festival:

Rosh Hashana speaks to the entire world because Judaism is a global religion. Consider the different calendars of religions. How do different religions mark the calendar of time? For Christianity this is Anno Domini, the Year of Our Lord. It marks the birth of Jesus as the Son of God. Muslims begin their calendar differently. They begin the calendar of the world with 622 AD, which dates back to Mohammed's Hajira, his flight from Mecca to Medina. Here history begins.

But the Jewish calendar celebrates not the birth of a Jewish savior, not the birth of a Jewish redeemer, not a Jewish event such as the Exodus out of Egypt or the Revelation of the Law at Sinai. Rosh Hashana celebrates the birth of the universe and the birth of humanity.

Rosh Hashana doesn't celebrate the birth of any particular religion – God did not create religion. God created the universe and within the universe, humanity. And the singular biblical verse that resonates throughout Judaism and world history is the verse in Genesis: chapter 1, verse 26: God created every human being – man, woman, child – in God's image. Whatever color, whatever race, whatever ethnicity, God created every human being with divine potentiality.

What Rabbi Schulweis is saying here would not be echoed by every rabbi. For many rabbis, and indeed for many people within the Jewish world, pace this passage in Genesis there are differences between Jews and non-Jews that would forever keep us apart. For many within the Jewish community freedom means "freedom from" – freedom from engaging with those of other faiths, from entering into relationship with those who see the world differently from within their religious tradition. It means free to be apart. But for Schulweis it means "freedom to" – the freedom to engage with those who are "other" and to open ourselves up to them. The reason for this is because God created each of us with our difference and uniqueness, yet we all share the common quality of "divine potentiality" (Schulweis's phrase); as a midrash puts it, despite our individuality we have a common ancestor, Adam, and that makes us family.

Second, a theological comment. The exposure to those who are religiously "Other" that accompanies freedom of religion is the reality of our existence today. It is not accidental or contingent. On the contrary, it is at the very heart of our way of life in contemporary Australia.

As people of religion, we are bound to treat this existential reality as meaningful. The reality of interreligious encounter in our lives forces us to ask what role it plays in God's plan. In Jewish terminology, it lays an obligation on us. The Hebrew term for divine obligation is mitzvah. In other words, I am arguing that the present-day situation that defines our freedom is tantamount to a new mitzvah, the mitzvah to interact in a meaningful and intentional way with those of other faiths and traditions. The interaction is inevitable. Carrying it out not as a random happening but as a mitzvah turns it into an act filled with "divine potentiality."

Many (most?) of my rabbinic colleagues would take issue with this argument. They would point out that the number of mitzvot is limited to 613, the number determined by the Oral Torah. It is not possible theologically to add to or subtract from this number. The suggestion that we ("mere mortals") can add a new mitzvah to the traditional list is idolatrous.

My response to this view is that there are moments in history which are so profoundly transformative that it is necessary to respond to them in completely new ways, with new mitzvot. The Churban, the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, was one such moment. Following the Churban the sages who gathered in Yavneh instituted seven new mitzvot which enabled the Jewish people to respond to the emergency with confidence and vision. Few Jews today are aware that these seven mitzvot are additional to the traditional 613 mitzvot (making 620 mitzvot), though they include some of the best-known Jewish obligations such as the lighting of lights for Shabbat, the washing of the hands before eating bread, the reading of the Scroll of Esther on Purim and the lighting of lights for Chanukah. [The others are reciting the Hallel Psalms at festivals, reciting blessings and creating a boundary or eruv to extend the distance one may carry objects over Shabbat.]

The early rabbis clearly believed that it was possible to add to the mitzvot in response to a traumatic period in Jewish life, the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people. These disruptive events were interpreted theologically as demanding an insightful and creative act of the religious imagination. In a similar manner, we are currently living through a period of intense disruption characterised by a degree of religious freedom beyond anything we have previously experienced. Our radical religious freedom challenges us to maintain our particular religious identities while simultaneously engaging with those who practice religions that are different from our own. My argument is that religiously motivated people need to take this state of affairs seriously as an expression of God's will. The way that the Jewish people do this most authentically is to interpret it in terms of mitzvah, divine obligation.

If we succeed in carrying out the mitzvah to engage wholeheartedly with the religious "others" whom we encounter every day as a result of our new-found freedom, I believe we shall be living out what God requires of us in the present hour. This mitzvah does not replace the other mitzvot of Jewish tradition; rather, it gives them added urgency and weight. That is what "freedom of religion" means to me. Being religiously free is to give expression to "the image of God" within me by encountering the religious "Other" as if he, too, contains "the image of God" within himself, though his religious observance and beliefs are often in conflict with mine because of their very "otherness". May this be God's will.