

What does one Asheville rabbi think of nonbelievers?



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HIGHLAND VIEWS

When I was the street chaplain in Marin County, California, my office was initially in a small room tucked behind the altar of the sanctuary in a large Protestant church. Many people living outside without a home came in to talk, pick up a blanket or bus ticket or simply rest. We started a “wellness” group in one church meeting space and then an art and poetry group. As time went on, the chaplaincy hosted meals and the church let us use the kitchen. For the most part, the pastor and congregation were supportive.

Unfortunately, the good relationship was challenged when some of our unhoused friends began sleeping in the doorways of the church. After a contentious meeting it was decided “No Trespassing” signs would go up over the doors and the police would be called if anyone saw someone sleeping on the property. One elderly doctor asked his fellow parishioners, “What ever happened to ‘forgive us our trespasses?’” I’ll always remember how encouraging that was to hear.

I tell this story because I recently had an engaging conversation with Rabbi Batsheva Meiri of Congregation

Beth HaTephila here in Asheville. I asked her a series of questions about the interface of her religious community and the secular world. Rabbi Meiri gave me a lot to think about, and my guess is that readers will appreciate some of her provocative responses.

The congregation has been here since the 1890s, so the Jewish community has deep roots in WNC. Along the way, the congregation met in an old church before building their own sanctuary in the 1940s. More recent renovations encircle the old facility. Having a history connected to a church structure, the synagogue now enjoys sharing space from time to time with several local churches. As Rabbi Meiri puts it, there are “longstanding, neighboring friendships” that have evolved.

The synagogue practices an “audacious hospitality” that shows a commitment to “diversity and connections” evidenced in their participation with Room in the Inn and pulpit exchanges with a UCC church, St. Mark’s and St. Mary’s.

With the recent bomb threats to Jewish centers here and across the nation, Rabbi Meiri says the “community stood together to affirm our relationships.” With the increase of anti-Semitism and hate crimes, she feels a strong sense of support from Asheville (I heard a similar sentiment from Khalid Bashir of the Islamic Center).

When asked how the Jewish tradition views nonbelievers (agnostics, atheists and secular people), she replied, “Judaism is less about beliefs than about action.” It’s not about creeds (the “I believes”) but the concern is to discover the “great commonalities” because “we can’t claim ‘Truth’ with a capital T.”

She went on to explain there is “no need for answers” but to “let the questions stand.” We can grapple with uncomfortable ideas and issues but “it can be comfortable to struggle together.” This approach “canonizes opposing views.” A stunning statement.

Reform Judaism has no interest in changing the minds of non-Jews. There is “no need for singularity of opinion” because there is “respect for one another as valuable human beings.” As long as there is no intent to be hurtful, different views, unsettling as they can be, are addressed in the context of a central question: “What is the forward action?” If people can work side by side for a constructive purpose, belief is not the issue and it need not divide.

Rabbi Meiri agreed that building bridges is important, and it seems Congregation Beth HaTephila is “weaving the living roots and branches” of those bridges every day. Already deeply involved in interfaith work, the synagogue never tries to “push God” on others but seeks to “hold space for

people to raise themselves.”

As for nature and naturalistic thought, Rabbi Meiri offered some wisdom that could have come straight from John Muir: “Nature is miraculous; we don’t need something outside of natural laws to be amazed.” She said we could call it “spiritual” but “amazing” is just as good. This might be a good lesson for us to mull over here in the beauty of the mountains and hollers, no matter what views we hold.

My conversation with Rabbi Meiri concluded with something I might hold as a thread to carry along this trail of bridges as we hear from other faith leaders. She said that “no one is excluded because they aren’t a member” because it is the right thing “to be welcoming of people not like you.” Including more people, with various voices, makes sense and makes us all stronger, maybe better.

Real community lies in “unity of purpose.”

I think we agreed: Healthier communities look forward, expecting good things as people find ways of living their amazement.

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