

A synagogue baking bread, not beliefs



Highland Views

Chris Highland
Guest columnist

“What are we doing with this wisdom?” was one of the first comments made by Rabbi Justin Goldstein when I met with him at Beth Israel synagogue in Asheville. He was reflecting on perceived “goals” of the Jewish faith, or any faith. “Judaism has to adapt,” he said, and we need to ask, “Is it helping us to flourish as human beings?”

As Rabbi Justin describes it, his tradition has a great deal to offer as a template for our culture and our world. But not a comfortable template. Judaism “thrives on contradiction” rather than answers, and “holds to sacred disagreement.”

A unique quality of Jewish religion is that there is “no doctrine of belief.” It’s not about “believing in God” but in an “intimate awareness of the divine.”

He referred to astronomer Carl Sagan’s agnostic wonder at the universe contrasted with physicist Stephen Hawking’s statement that he believed there is no god. Instead of getting derailed by theological dogmas and dilemmas, Judaism centers on a “doctrine of behavior” inviting a fearless honesty in our opinions and actions.

“The God metaphor is a dead metaphor.” A startling statement from a clergy person. “God language is distracting,” diverting our attention from the ethical decisions and living we need most.

Yet, he says, “We don’t have the next metaphor [or the] new language” necessary to communicate our deepest experiences, thoughts and feelings. He mentioned art as one medium for expression.

This made me wonder if indeed Art (creativity, imagination) is the next step, the new language for what we’ve called “Religion.”

Rabbi Justin told a story, a kind of parable, about a king who gave two servants a basket of wheat and a bundle of flax. Later, the king returned and asked the servants to bring out what he gave to them. One brought the basket of wheat with the bundle of flax on top. The other had woven the flax into a table cloth and served bread he had made with the wheat.

The original story was a teaching on scripture and law. As I heard it, the story could also teach something about faith and tradition. Some want to preserve the old ways and beliefs while others adapt, weaving and baking something more useful, hospitable.

The rabbi and I agreed, religion as we know it is dying, and perhaps needs to die. What will we do with the baskets and bundles from the past?

In his racial equity work, Justin sees how critical it is to provide space for people to process their painful experience and “heal from trauma.” He said we ought to “expand our entry points” to include people who have often been explicitly or implicitly excluded.

His congregation refers to itself as “independent egalitarian,” unaffiliated with any specific branch of the Jewish tree. Women are fully equal and participate with men.

In reply to my question about how freely he can speak about his perspectives, Rabbi Justin was clear: there is a mutual sense of “trust, love and respect.” He knows he can speak in a “genuine and truthful” way. Congregants are expected to have disagreements, but they know they are hearing what he truly thinks and feels.

He was ordained a rabbi by the Conservative arm of Judaism and served a synagogue in Maine before ar-



Rabbi Justin Goldstein in Beth Israel Synagogue.

PHOTOS BY CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO CITIZEN TIMES



Beth Israel Synagogue in Asheville

riving in Asheville almost six years ago. Justin and Beth Israel are a thriving community of families, involved in justice efforts locally and beyond.

Diversity is deeply valued. It’s not that there are “many paths up the same mountain”—as he says, “there are many mountains!” Then we joked, “And why does it always have to be a mountain?”

Those who seek “the voice of God” may be disappointed. Justin thinks the “voice” ironically begins in silence. In Hebrew, what the prophet Elijah heard on a mountain was “the sound of thin silence.” And, Justin mused, the voice may be more like an echo.

I asked Rabbi Justin about the future of religion. He replied, “There will always be spiritual expression in humanity”—we need ways to “commune, communicate [and enjoy] community.” And, as he sees it, the main question is: “Will religion connect people?”

Regarding the future of religious traditions, Justin wonders, “Who knows how that will look?”

At the conclusion of our conversation I asked Rabbi Justin if I could see inside the sanctuary. As we entered the bright and welcoming space I immediately remarked about the fresh scent of wood (over the last two years the synagogue has undergone a major renovation). The newness of the room seemed symbolic of the new and renewing path taken by this forward-thinking synagogue.

Weaving cloth. Baking bread. One rabbi and his innovative congregation have prepared an inclusive feast of questions.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com.