

Rosh HaShanah Morning
October 3, 2016 – 1 Tishre 5777

Edgar Bronfman was the longtime CEO of the Seagram Company and served for over twenty years as President of the World Jewish Congress. He was the founding chairman of the board of governors of Hillel: The Foundation for Jewish Life on Campus and, through the Samuel Bronfman Foundation (named after his father), Edgar Bronfman nurtured initiatives to cultivate Jewish learning, including the Bronfman Fellowships and MyJewishLearning.com. Among the many awards and commendations he received, included is the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1999. Edgar Bronfman led a very rich and full life and passed away in December of 2013. His memory is indeed a blessing.

Bronfman spent his adult life supporting Jewish lives and creative practice around the world, yet one of the last things he worked on was making a case for being Jewish. His book is called Why Be Jewish? : A Testament and was completed just weeks before he passed away. Bronfman left us a legacy. It is evident that his interests went beyond the world of business – and really covered the variety of ways Judaism comes alive in our world.

His was a Jewish journey that, “... step by step,” as Bronfman describes, “led [him] from a dismissive attitude toward Judaism to one of joyous embrace.” During the course of his journey he discovered that “even for a non-religious Jew who rejects the notion of a supernatural God acting on our behalf, Judaism remains an immensely rich enterprise.”

Let me say that again: “[E]ven for a non-religious Jew who rejects the notion of a supernatural God acting on our behalf, Judaism remains an immensely rich enterprise.” I am thinking that this description does not only apply to Edgar Bronfman. The term “non-religious Jew” can apply to many of us... and many of us might just reject the notion of a supernatural God acting on our behalf and then wrestle with a way to describe our own notion of God. We learn from Bronfman that Judaism is the wrestling... and so much more.

In earlier generations, being Jewish was not a choice; it was a condition of life, defined by the ties of history and community that endured among immigrants, and by the anti-Semitism that was still prevalent. Nowadays, we can

choose whether or not to hold on to Jewish practice – which can seem antiquated, patriarchal, and so distant from our own lives and values. As the ultra-Orthodox have larger and larger families, Bronfman worries that our Judaism could be redefined by those who have chosen to turn their backs on a good portion of the modern world.

He reminds us that “although the Jewish religion has always contained a strain of zealotry, it has an even more powerful tradition of openness, inclusiveness, and questioning... Judaism is too precious a thing to lose.”

Within our tradition, there is precedence for creativity and adaptation. There is a Talmudic story where God grants Moses’ request to travel into the future. Moses finds himself sitting in a class of the second century scholar, Rabbi Akiva. There the rabbi is expounding a law from Torah; however, Moses becomes hopelessly distraught – this does not sound familiar to him at all. When the class is over, a student asks Rabbi Akiva to identify the source of the law under discussion. “It is a law given to Moses at Sinai,” Rabbi Akiva replies. And at hearing this, Moses gives a sigh of relief... “They didn’t forget me after all.”

In creating this story, the Talmudic rabbis teach that, instead of being ironclad law, the Torah is subject to creative interpretation. Though tradition tells us that Moses received the Torah at Sinai, the sages emphasize that it is the responsibility of future generations to interpret its meaning. As Bronfman states: “Our sacred texts are the raw material, not the finished product.”

As Reform Jews today, we understand that “reform” is a verb – an active verb. To reform is to create for ourselves a Jewish practice that is relevant and enriching. As did the rabbis of the Talmud... as did the rabbis and philosophers of the Middle Ages... as did the rabbis and great Jewish thinkers of the *Haskalah* – the Jewish Enlightenment of the 1800’s... so we are called upon to do today.

Let’s turn to Edgar Bronfman’s challenge of being a secular Jew, but not comfortable with calling himself an atheist. He brought this question up to Rabbi Harold Schulweis, author and longtime spiritual leader of Temple Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California. Bronfman shared with Rabbi Schulweis that “[I]n the face of the complexity of the universe, I don’t want to assert that I can be sure of anything. How do I describe the beauty I feel when listening to [great music]...

when I take in a landscape bathed in light or see the unbridled joy of children at play? Something inside me stirs that I cannot define or describe... As magnificent as reason is, it would be hubris to think that we can, though our limited senses, understand the whole.”

Jewish tradition has always grappled with the difficulty of comprehending the universe, of taking in the grandeur of creation. In the book of Job, God gives a lengthy recital of the world’s unfathomable workings and wonders. Job quickly learns that despite his attempts to penetrate the great mysteries of God and God’s creation, his senses are simply too limited to grasp the astonishing complexity of the universe.

Rabbi Schulweis introduced Bronfman to the term “Godliness.” As Schulweis told him – and tells us in his book *For Those Who Can’t Believe* – “To believe in Godliness is to believe in the verbs and adverbs that refer to activities of divinity... The question to be asked of those who seek God is not whether they believe in a noun that cannot be known, but whether they believe in gerunds of Godliness: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supporting the fallen, pursuing peace, loving the neighbor, welcoming the stranger. The imperatives of Godliness call [us] to imitate the ways of Godliness.” These ways of Godliness Bronfman describes as “moral miracles.”

In addition, a sense of Godliness can describe our sense of wonder and mystery – the miracles of the natural world.

And our Jewish tradition helps us to express our wonder and gratitude – through the *Shehecheyanu* – the blessing which gives thanks “for giving us life, for sustaining us, and for enabling us to reach this very special time.” This kind of acknowledgement – said at seeing a rainbow, hearing thunder, spotting a flash of lightening, seeing a large mountain, coming upon a rushing river... celebrating a festival... or the birth of a child (or grandchild) – this kind of acknowledgement helps us slow down, take a minute, and reminds us of the goodness in our lives... of the Godliness in our lives.

In making his case for being Jewish, Bronfman came up with twelve principles, written in verb form, reminding us (and based on the Jewish emphasis of deed over creed) that these are things to do, not things to believe:

Revere godliness – the true, the good, and the beautiful.
Ask questions.
Commit to repairing the outer *and* the inner world.
Perform acts of loving-kindness.
Assist society’s weakest members.
Champion social justice and environmental causes.
Welcome the stranger.
Engage with Jewish traditions, texts, philosophy, history, and art.
Study and strive for excellence in the humanities and other secular fields.
Promote family and community.
Embrace key Jewish holidays and life-cycles events.
Conduct business ethically.

Notice that at the core of Bronfman’s list is the importance of engagement with Jewish texts; he is convinced that “without [this engagement] we can easily end up with an eviscerated kind of Judaism.” In order to be able to make changes and choices – we need to know what we are changing and how that informs the choices we make. Throughout our history, Judaism has embraced what is called “cognitive pluralism” – the multiple ways of viewing our world and its issues. This is where we are expected to ask questions. Questioning, however, is only one step in the process of making change. Bronfman writes that “[M]oving from an imperfect world to a more perfect one requires a fierce commitment of body and spirit... [Across time and up to the present] many Jews have taken up the challenge, committing themselves to making change in Jewish life and seeking to build a better world.

We cannot hide ourselves away and expect the world to comply with our wishes. We need to *be in* the world; to actively engage in making the changes we want to see come to fruition.

So much for repair and change of the world at large – the concept of *tikkun olam*; but what of repair of the world within – known as *tikkun middot*? Engaging with the hard work of indentifying and admitting where we have erred is a real challenge. Judaism requires us consistently to take stock and to repair our selves when our moral tank is running empty. The period of time between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur allows us to be reflective; to take a look at the person

in the mirror and ask if we are happy with the person looking back. If not, why not? Have we hurt someone or made a mistake? Where have we failed ourselves or others? Where are we out of balance?

Let's face it. The time during the High Holy Days is a great time to reflect. But, *each and every day during the year* provides us with an ongoing opportunity to be the best that we can be – inside and out.

Bronfman brings his gift to us to a close as he reflects that he has given much of his life to the Jewish world, and wishes he had many more years to serve this noble calling. But as his days grow short, he “would thank his stars even more if *we* would choose to stand at Sinai; if *we* would choose ... to [recognize that each and every one of us is a link in a chain that,] generation after generation held fast to the dream that through our individual and collective efforts we could transform the troubled world we share into a more perfect, more humane, and more civilized place.”

Kein y'hi ratzon – May it be so.