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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

Many people have asked, what it is that makes our religion unique? Wherein do we differ from other religions? After all, almost all modern religions speak about loving your neighbor, doing good, being moral, raising a family, etc. This is true. However, what distinguishes a religion or culture from another is how it balances the various competing forces in life, how it prioritizes competing positive values. You can tell what a person's true value system is when he comes to ~~a~~^a crossroads in life and must choose not between good and evil but between two competing positive values. What are his priorities? Does he decide to send his children to college or invest his money for his retirement? Does he take his aged parent into his home or does he accept an assignment in another city which would be good for his career but would force his parent into a nursing home?

What distinguishes the Jewish religion is the priority of its value system which differs greatly from other value systems. For example, traditionally great emphasis was placed on education. In Eastern Europe it was not unheard of for a family to spend 50% of their income to insure that their children received a Jewish education. If a person came to choose between hiring a teacher or buying a pair of shoes, the teacher would come first. If the choice was either to study or miss several meals, the choice was to study. There was, also, a great emphasis on family, what you were expected and required to do for your family. Judaism's priority system is what makes it unique.

We believe that when G-d intervened in history on Mount Sinai He gave us a point of balance for these competing positive forces which we maintain to this very day. He prioritized our values. This is what we mean when we say the Torah has never changed. The law never changes but obviously circumstances do. Sometimes, in order to maintain the same balance, we do exactly the opposite thing we did before. For example, the Torah commands us to guard

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our health. This means that in the summer we must do the exact opposite of what we do in the winter. In the winter we must put on a coat when we go outdoors while in the summer we must take it off. The Torah has not changed one bit but circumstances have. A vivid illustration of this was brought home to me several years ago when an individual approached me with a question. He asked me, "Is it permissible to stick little babies with pins?" I looked at him with anger and was ready to throw him out. I said, "What, are you a sadist? In Judaism you are not allowed to make a wound. You are not allowed to torture people. Do you realize the psychological damage as well as the physical damage you could do to the baby? Aside from the damage you would do to the baby, look at the terrible damage you would be doing to your own soul. What are you? Some kind of a nut?" He looked at me crushed and said, "But, Rabbi, I am a doctor". He wanted to know if he could give babies shots. "Oh", I said, "that's different". Actually though, when you give a baby a shot you are sticking it with a pin but it is for its benefit. It is to prevent diseases, etc. Obviously the law did not change but the circumstances did. The Jewish religion clearly dictates that to preserve a baby's health and prevent disease we are allowed to give shots.

In order to tell how Judaism prioritizes the various competing positive values in life, requires a great deal of study. That's why the study of Torah is so important. When people try to change Judaism, they do not want to allow Judaism to preserve its own point of balance between competing values but they want it to adopt another culture or religion's priority system. They want to change Judaism and make it into something it is not. For example, those who would downgrade the family and accept alternative life-styles completely destroy Judaism's priority system. Those who downgrade Jewish learning and are not interested in supporting what they want to do

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with Jewish sources and opinions obviously have already prejudged any issue they are discussing by adopting another culture's priority system and discounting Judaism's entirely. The Torah does not change. Circumstances, though, sometimes do change and in order to maintain our same position we may do opposite things. In fact, this distinction between the law and the facts is recognized in the court systems of America where we have juries who determine the facts and judges who then determine the law based on the facts. If the facts change, then a different law applies. The law does not change but which law applies depends on the facts. In Jewish life throughout the ages most of the arguments have been on interpreting the facts, not on what is the law.

One of the ways Judaism differs from other religions is that Judaism is not just concerned with the individual. Judaism is very much concerned about building a community. We believe that the way you organize a community has a great deal of bearing upon how people live and act. We have a responsibility not only to ourselves and to G-d but, also, to our community. This can be seen even in our American system. What distinguishes the United States from, for example, Mexico? The people in Mexico are obviously as smart and as virtuous and as dedicated and as committed as the people in the United States, but we, here in the United States, have had much greater success in allowing each individual to fulfill ^{his} ~~their~~ potential than ⁱⁿ Mexico. Why is this? It is because of the way we are organized, the way our community is set up. It is because of our form of government, because of our having originally distributed the land, the Homestead Act, etc. America is strong and prosperous, ~~and~~ not primarily because Americans are ambitious and hard working, but because ^{of} the way the community is set up. ~~Our priorities have allowed us to accomplish what we have accomplished.~~

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Judaism, too, is interested in community. We believe that it is only by attaching yourself to the community, by working within the community that an individual can fulfill himself. We, also, believe that the community has a responsibility to the individual to make sure that he has the wherewithal to develop himself. Concentrations of wealth are to be abhorred. One class of people should not control all the resources and, thereby, reduce the rest of the population to serfdom. This not only makes them poor but, also, prevents them from choosing to serve G-d. Limiting a person's freedom stops a person from having the capacity to serve G-d. Economic slavery is as bad as physical slavery.

These ideas are found in the Torah portion, Behar. We learn that G-d decreed the laws of the Sabbatical year and the Jubilee year on Mount Sinai just as He did the laws of personal morality. Judaism seeks to balance the competing forces of good within ^{a society} just as it does within an individual. Judaism has a priority system in community as well as in individual ethics. Judaism says we are individuals within a group. The individual has responsibilities to the group and the group has responsibilities to the individual. The traditional form of davening expresses this relationship beautifully.

Each individual at a Minyon prays by himself just pausing to wait for the Cantor to say the last lines of each prayer. However, certain prayers cannot be said without a Minyon and praying together with others who are praying is a totally different experience than praying alone and much more meaningful and uplifting. Certain individuals at certain times have responsibilities to the Minyon and the Minyon has responsibilities to them to let them lead the prayer, etc. The group does not dominate the individual but, at the same time, the individual contributes to the group. This balancing of the relationship between the group and the individual is one of Judaism's most unique features. In all areas of life Judaism has this

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unique balance.

Soon we are to celebrate Israel's Independence Day. Israel gives Jews throughout the world the unique opportunity to demonstrate to the world Jewish values on a community level which is impossible ⁱⁿ any other place in the world. We already know of the many positive contributions that Israel has made ~~already~~ in the areas of agriculture, science, child care programs, community living, Torah scholarship, etc. This is only the beginning. It is our belief that Israel must continue to flourish and grow because the world needs the messages that will come from it. It will serve as a beacon to the whole world because it will show the world the uniqueness of our religion, and based on Israel's experience the whole world will benefit. May Israel continue to grow and flourish and may we soon see it at total peace with all its neighbors.

In the Torah portion Behar we learn how society may be just even though things may look good on the surface if things below are rotten the whole society will collapse. This holds true throughout life. Unfortunately, there are many people who just like to put on a good show. They constantly stress surface things. This reminds me of the story of the businessman named Goldschmidt who could not find time to take a vacation. Finally his wife prevailed upon him to go to Florida. Unfortunately, at the end of two weeks he dropped dead. They brought his body back to New York. His family did not observe the Jewish rules of not viewing the body. In Houston most of our rules of mourning are observed primarily, I believe, because Levy's Funeral Home is located in a far neighbor. We are not bothered by the problem of viewing and all the bodies buried in our cemeteries are washed and buried in Tachreecheem thanks to the good work of Chevra Kadisha headed by Julius Chapman. In any event, the body was placed for viewing and some of the business partners passed the body and commented how tanned and healthy the man looked to which his wife replied, "He should. The two weeks in Florida did him a world of good". This, of course, stressed how many people just base all their opinions on surface impressions. This, many times, does grave injustice. Not all Jews in Houston are rich and just ask Henry Spira of the Gemillos Chesed Society how many free loans are needed. One of the major reasons why corporations want college graduates is not because of the skills they learn in college but because they speak a similar language. They are able to communicate much easier. They do not have so many hassles, but it is really only a surface thing. In Judaism we are taught not to rely on surface impressions. In this Torah portion we are taught that you should not take from him interest and you should fear the Lord your G-d and your brothers should live with you. You are not supposed to charge interest to those who need a loan for the basic necessities of life. We are not talking about business investments. It is strange, though, that here it uses the expression and you shall fear the Lord. Usually this expression is used when

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only the individual himself can tell whether he is doing the right thing. For example, only you know whether or not you are giving good advice. I once had a friend who was a stockbroker and when another one of my friends came to him he gave him the worst possible advice. He was mad at him about a girlfriend or something. It turned out that the stock market acted according to his advice and in two months my friend was a millionaire and he gave my stockbroker friend a Cadillac. My stockbroker friend felt so guilty he had to come and pour his heart out to me. In this case, though, the expression and you should fear the Lord your G-d does not fit in because we can tell whether or not the person has charged interest. The meaning here, the Rabbis say, is you should not even use the fear of G-d to fool people. That, too, is a terrible sin. Once in New York we found a caterer who was cheating on the kosher laws. When we confronted the Rabbi who was in charge of the mashgiachs he said how is this possible. The caterer davens with a Gartel. Surface impressions were false. There are many people in the world who all they crave is publicity and honor and they are only concerned with surface things. One of the big differences between Israel and the United States up till now has been that in Israel they are concerned with the real thing rather than appearances. The fruits may not look as nice as the fruits here but they taste a lot better. The hospitals may not look the way we expect a hospital to look but people live longer in Israel with all the terrorism than in the United States. Today we are honoring a couple who shun publicity, who have done so many good things that nobody knows about. They are real people. It is not the surface that counts. It is what is beneath it. Substance is always more important than appearances.

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the suits and clothes and houses they need and the poor, like in South America, would grow poorer and society would collapse. We need each other. Parents need children and children need parents and we should teach them that we need each other more than we need things. The story about the Roman father who took his son to the Colliseum. There some people were being thrown to the lions. The little boy started to cry. The father said, "Why are you crying? These people are enemies of the State." The little boy said, "I know, Daddy". "Then why are you crying?" said the father. "Because the little lion in the corner is not getting any." Unfortunately, that's the way many people feel today. They just want to get theirs. This attitude can only lead to destruction. We all need each other and only when we all work with each other can we gain material prosperity. The symbol of Judaism is a Covenant, a treaty. We need G-d and even in some ways G-d needs us and we certainly need each other.

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Everyone knows that the 7th day is Shabbos. We all speak about Shabbos and its obligations and duties and many people think that Shabbos, itself, means the 7th day, but the word "Shabbos" in Hebrew refers not only to the 7th day of the week. In the Torah Shabbos also refers to holidays and in the Torah portion Behar it also refers to the sabbatical year. In the 7th year there should be a Shabbos for the land, a Shabbos for G-d. We also learn that the Jubilee Year, or Yovel year, is also referred to as a Shabbos. The word "Shabbos" in Hebrew means "to cease", "to desist", and "to rest". The word Shabbos does not just refer to the 7th day. The Rabbis teach us that if we look at the four things Shabbos refers to we can understand the needs of the human soul. On the Sabbath, the 7th day of the week, we say "Shofas Vayeeno Nofash" "and he rested", and it is commonly explained "he was refreshed", but the word "Vayeeno" comes from the soul. Shabbos is what we need in order to have a rich inner life. Life only has meaning and depth when we have a rich inner life. The Shabbos, the 7th day, stands for one of the concepts that we must have if we are to have a meaningful life, if we are to have an enriched and integrated life. Shabbos teaches all of us that everyone has worth just because he is and not because he creates or does things. So often in America today the view is that you are only what you do, that if for some reason you cannot produce you are no good. Of course, we believe people should work and produce things, but that is not the essence of their being. They are important just because G-d created them. So often today people feel they only have worth if they have accomplished certain things, and if not they are failures. I remember when I was a Hillel Director, that the students who came to me contemplating suicide were not the "C" students afraid of getting an "F", but the "A" students afraid they would get a "B". They just could not take the fact that they were not "A" students, and although most of them never attempted suicide, they had deep psychological problems and some ended up under psychiatric care. It is not important whether you have achieved all your goals or are elected president of this or that, but just that you gave it your best. Each of us have self-worth and Shabbos teaches us that. Every Jew is a king or queen on Shabbos even though on

Shabbos we do not produce anything. The Shabbos is used in conjunction with the holidays of Pesach, Succos, and Shavuos, and teaches us the importance of community. The holidays come at particular times of the year. We can overcome the cold and the heat and all of nature's vicissitudes if we have people to help us. The holidays also stand for history. We can overcome slavery and exile and wanderings if we have a community, if we help each other. Our inner life needs the support of family and friends and community. The Shabbos that we talk about in this Torah portion, Behar, is concerned with space. We each need a space that we know is ours to which we belong. One of the problems that we Jewish people had during the exile was that we had no space. This led to great insecurity and, although we were able to survive because we knew G-d needed us and wanted us and we had a community, it was difficult. Our space was our books, but today with the founding of the State of Israel each Jew breathes easier because we know we have our own space and Jews in this country are much more aggressive politically because we know we have a space. Everybody has to feel they have a place, a place in a family and a place somewhere on earth. Finally, the Shabbos of the Jubilee, of the Yovel, stands for freedom, that we are free, that our fate is not sealed by the gods, that we can make meaningful choices, that we have the power to do good and we know we can do good. That's why at the end of this Torah portion it says "Es Shabbos Sosai Tishmoru Umigdoshi Tiro" "My Sabbath you should observe and My holy things you should revere." If a person has these qualities of Shabbos, if he knows he has self-worth just because he is, if he has a community and has a place and knows that he is free, then he can accomplish great things as long as he realizes that this world is a holy place and we are supposed to be G-d's partners in creation. I am reminded of a story they tell about a fellow who went out to the golf course and there he came across a difficult hole and he was thinking to put his new ball down, but then he saw there was a lake and he decided to put down his old ball when, all of a sudden, he heard a voice shout out to him, "Use the new ball." He took out the new ball and put it down when all of a sudden he heard a voice call out, "Take a practice swing." He then

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took a practice swing. Feeling confident he stepped up to the tee only to hear the voice boom out, "Use the old ball." In our scheme of things it does not make any difference whether you use the old ball or new ball. It is up to us and whether we knock it into the lake or not does not matter. We each have great self-worth.

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In the Torah portion Behar we learn about the Sabbatical year. The Sabbatical year is referred to as Shabbos. Actually, in the Torah the word "Shabbos" is used to describe four different occurrences. It, of course, describes the weekly Shabbos, which commemorates the creation of the world. It refers to all Jewish holidays as Shabbos. Also, in the Torah the Sabbatical year is referred to as Shabbos as is the Jubilee year, the Yovel. The characteristic of all these Shabbatot is that they are holy. We all know about Shabbos Kodesh, the holiness of the Shabbos. We all know, too, about the holidays, which are called Micra Kodesh, the convocations of holiness. Of course, we learn about the Jubilee year in this week's Torah portion. "V'Kee Dashtem Mishnassa HaMeesheem Shonoh - And you shall sanctify the 50th year." The characteristics of all these four institutions is holiness. In fact, there is another institution which is called holiness in Hebrew and that is marriage. Marriage is known as Kedushim. What exactly does it mean, though, when we talk about holiness? What does holiness mean?

First of all, of course, we know holiness means to be separate, to be distinct. The Jewish people are considered to be a holy people because we are separate, unique, and distinct. It does not mean we are better than other peoples, but we have been given a special mission from G-d to be His partners in spreading His moral teachings throughout the world. Although many Jews are not worthy of this task, and many Jews do not even want this task, the rest of the nations of the world know we have this task. That is how Hitler, when he set about destroying us, justified what he was doing by saying, "The Jewish people gave the world a conscience, and we do not need a conscience." So, holiness means to be separate.

