

What's Religion Good For?

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There was a time when people sought out religion to answer their questions about the physical world around them. Why does it rain some years, but now we have a drought? How did the world come into being? Why are humans different from other animals?

In more recent centuries, we have found questions about our physical universe better answered by science. That has led many people to argue that religion is becoming obsolete as there are now fewer questions for which science does not have an answer.

On Slichot eve, our congregation began an examination of the relationship between science and religion, in part as a result of a grant we received through the AAAS, American Association for the Advancement of Science. As part of that examination, we discussed various views of the role of religion, roles that go beyond providing answers to those questions that science can't solve.

One such direction is that promoted by Freud, though he could hardly be considered a fan of religion. Still, he argued that religion has a civilizing influence, that it steers us away from rape and pillage and toward charity, compassion, and cooperation, all values that are beneficial to society and to individuals.

A different, though related, argument was made by Emile Durkheim, who described a phenomenon he called “collective effervescence.” He argued that the shared experiences of a religious community are intense enough to unify individuals into cooperative groups. Evolutionary biologists have pointed out that this movement toward cooperative groups gave religionists a competitive advantage. A book that I mentioned over the holidays, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, argued that religion provides values beyond fairness and care. When people share rituals, songs, and stories, when they share meals and heroes and even common hardships, then they are bound together in ways that strengthen the caring they feel for each other and help overcome the free-rider problem. Their bonds help them to overcome selfishness, self-centeredness, and the human tendency to take advantage without contributing.

Contemporary writers also stress the benefits that religion provides in helping us manage our emotions. How we feel is important and affects our functioning at every level. Religion reduces anxiety, stress, and depression—it provides consolation in times of suffering—it offers meaning and hope. Many people have commented to me that the customs associated with Jewish mourning—shivah, Kaddish, and having people gather—fill very real human needs during a time of intense grief and emotional need. Religious experiences enhance our connections and train us in empathy and compassion.

During the years when we have a new member class, we explore the various reasons that people choose to join a congregation. Often new members relate to

the exact issues I have mentioned. People join looking for community, seeking to transmit values to their children, hoping to find deeper meaning in their lives. Perhaps you relate to one of these needs more fully; maybe you were more attracted by community and solidarity or by the desire for some transcendent understanding of what is happening in your life or in our world. Whatever your reasons for joining Shir Hadash, we are delighted that you are with us, and we are especially pleased to be welcoming our new members this evening.