

## What is “Religion?”

According to recent statistics, about two thirds of American Jews do not belong to a synagogue. I feel like I’ve met many of them. Yet according to the same study (from the Pew Research Center a couple of years ago), around 80% of American Jews say that being Jewish is an important part of their identity. I often hear this phrase: “I’m not really religious...” and with a sheepish look, they sometimes add, “I’m sorry, Rabbi,” as if I might take offence at their lack of religious behavior. It leads me to wonder what it is about the word “religion” that seems to keep so many people away.

Perhaps there is a misconception about the word. I often meet people who have been clearly influenced by Jewish values and upbringing despite minimal current participation in ritual or synagogue attendance. Does this render them “not religious?” While I find these studies helpful, statistics have their own limitations. Until we get to know those behind the statistic, we will be unable to understand what they really mean. Many have shared with me a love of Judaism, but a distaste for what they call “organized religion.”

All people have unique, personal reasons for why they connect or don’t connect with the various aspects of religion. I’m reminded of a Talmudic story in which a king had a son who went astray. The son was told, “Return to your father.” The son replied that he could not. The king then sent a messenger to the son, which said, “Come as far as you can, and I will meet you there.”

The New Year gives us each the opportunity to re-evaluate what is important to us and what we are going to do about it. Let’s each resolve to “come as far as we can.”

L’shalom,

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