

What Does God Most Care About?

Tue, Sep 19, 2023 • Prager's Column



This column is being written during the 10-day period between Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement) — two Jewish holidays known together as the “High Holy Days.” Just as many Christians who do not generally attend church do so on Easter and Christmas, many Jews who rarely attend synagogue do so on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

This year, for the 17th consecutive year (except for 2020, when I could find no open venue due to government-induced lockdowns), I conducted Rosh Hashanah services and will conduct Yom Kippur services (pragerhighholidays.net). In Jewish life, the sermons on those two holidays are the most important of the year. The following is a summary of the talks I delivered on Rosh Hashanah.

What does God most care about?

The answer is: good and evil, i.e., how we human beings treat each other.

Here are some proofs from the Bible, the book that gave us God:

1. The reason the Bible gives for why God brought the flood that destroyed the world (saving only Noah and his family) is that humans were evil. Virtually every ancient society had a flood story but, as far as I could deduce, only in the Bible’s story did God destroy mankind because people were evil. For example, according to the contemporaneous ancient Near East Babylonian story, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the gods

destroyed humanity (except for a man named Utnapishtim) because humans made so much noise they kept the gods awake.

2. In every flood story, the gods saved an individual and a mate (otherwise, the flood would have ended human life). The only reason God saved Noah was that he was “a righteous man in his generations.” Again, the sole concern in the Bible’s flood story is moral.

3. God is repeatedly described as a moral being. One example: “The Lord your God is... mighty and awesome, not partial and takes no bribe, executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the stranger, providing them with food and clothing” (Deuteronomy).

4. The fundamental human division in the Hebrew Bible is not between Jew and non-Jew but between good and bad people. That is why the Hebrew Bible describes so many non-Jews as good — in addition to Noah, the daughter of Pharaoh; Jethro, a Midianite priest; Caleb (whose ethnicity is not Hebrew but Kennizite); Rahab, the Canaanite prostitute who hid the Hebrew spies; and Ruth the Moabite (who becomes the ancestor of the Messiah) — and so often criticizes the Jews for their bad behavior. No holy work is so critical of the people of that holy work’s religion as the Hebrew Bible is of the Hebrews. Again, that is because God is preoccupied with moral differences, not with differences of ethnicity or even of religion. As Viktor Frankl wrote in his seminal book, “Man’s Search for Meaning,” there are only two races: the decent and the indecent.

5. The Hebrew Bible — and therefore God — is also preoccupied with moral treatment of animals. Most people do not realize that treatment of animals is included in the Ten Commandments. Not only must one’s animals be allowed to rest every week on the Sabbath, but there are also laws in the Torah (the Five Books of Moses) that prohibit muzzling animals while they work in the fields, so that they are free to eat while they work; yoking animals of two different species (and therefore having different gaits and sizes) to the same plow; and eating the limb of a living animal.

6. While slavery was not outright banned, 3,000 years ago the Torah prohibited returning a slave to his master, kidnapping people to sell them as slaves (that alone should have made Bible-believers abolitionists) and sentenced a master who murdered his slave to death (that is what the punishment — “avenged” — most likely meant).

7. The Prophets (the Hebrew word means “spokesmen” — God’s spokesmen) were preoccupied with moral behavior.

8. God is repeatedly depicted as more concerned with moral behavior than with anything else: “God has told you, O humans, what is good and what the Lord demands of you: Only to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” (Micah). “Hate evil and love good, and establish justice” (Amos). “Those of you who love God must hate evil” (Psalms).

If Rabbis, priests and ministers are to be true to the Bible, they need to emphasize that what God demands most from their co-religionists is good behavior. That is not only obvious from the Hebrew Bible, but from the New Testament as well. Yes, the New Testament teaches that there is no salvation without right faith (i.e., faith in Christ). But there is no right faith without right behavior. As James put it,

“Faith without works is dead.” And as Jesus, quoted in Matthew, put it, “In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”

The religious tragedy is that too often religious people have placed something above moral behavior — ritual practice among Jews and theology among Christians. Both are very important because goodness will not survive the death of Judeo-Christian values. Just look at the moral chaos in large parts of secular America today. The most secular institutions of our society — the universities — have become moral and intellectual wastelands.

We need God and concern with goodness. God without concern with goodness leads to evil. And so does concern with goodness without God.

This column was originally posted on [Townhall.com](https://www.townhall.com).