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**“From the Ten Commandments to the Four Noble Truths:  
American Jews and Buddhism”**

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Only two percent of Americans are Jewish, but thirty percent of American Buddhists are Jewish. So many Buddhists are Jews that we have our own name: JuBus. Over the course of my life, I have been to eight Buddhist meditation retreats with my family. My dad became a Buddhist about twenty years ago and when I was five we started going to some family retreats because my mom got interested and my parents wanted my brother and me to be a part of it. All of these retreats have been in the tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh the Vietnamese Buddhist master.

Throughout my life, I have learned as much about Buddhism as I have about Judaism but as I thought about it, it wasn't clear to me why so many Jews in America are drawn to Buddhism and that is why I chose this topic to explore for my Bar Mitzvah. Besides my own personal knowledge and experience, I read a couple of books, watched a documentary film on the topic and interviewed a bunch of JuBus like me.

The documentary that I watched offers a historical explanation for why so many American Jews have been drawn to Buddhism, and it makes sense to me. The story goes something like this. In the first half of the twentieth century the Jewish population in the United States quadrupled. In the years immediately following World War Two (in the 1950's), there were many Jewish parents who were themselves the children of immigrants, and what they wanted most was for their children to fit into American society. In an effort to assimilate, many gave up Jewish traditions, especially the religion. At the same time, many congregations were focused more on raising money both for themselves to build modern Jewish communities and synagogues and also to support Israel. Many congregations were more focused on that than they were on nurturing the Jewish religion and spiritual practices.

According to this theory, for many Jewish American communities, post-war Jewish assimilation led to a “spiritual vacuum.” Judith Linzer, who did a study on Jewish seekers in Eastern Religions writes, “As I grew up, where could I learn about the life of the spirit? Was I raised with it? No! I associated Jewishness with bagels and lox, with latkes and kugels, corned beef on rye.” Food aside, young Jews wanted to fit into American culture and not be different. And because of anti-Semitism and the shadow of the concentration camps, they experienced being Jewish as a burden and were eager to “shed” it. As this generation came of age in the 1960s and 1970s and the counterculture boomed, a lot of alternative experiences became available, including meditation and Buddhism.

Another important factor undoubtedly was the Holocaust. Judith Linzer describes her father: “He said that there was no God because God would not have allowed six million Jews to be murdered. On some days he said he loved the Jewish people more than God did, because God obviously didn't love the Jewish people very much. My father passionately loved the Jewish people and at the same time he hated Judaism.” Judith Linzer is one of many who turned from Judaism to Eastern religion; for her, a part of this transition was an effort to make sense of the Holocaust.

A well-known Buddhist teacher who is also Jewish, Sylvia Boorstein, addresses this issue from a slightly different perspective. She writes: “Pain confuses the mind, and terrible pain, holocaust pain, takes a very long time to subside. Jews have been recovering for 50 years. It is very difficult to trust in the natural capacity of the heart to heal and fully love when it is so badly wounded. Even as we are healing, wounding is happening all around us, and as Jews—particularly as Jews—we feel the pain of it.”

Many Jews are still suffering from this pain and the fact that something so horrible could happen. For some Jews, Judaism has not helped them to cope with the suffering. One woman I interviewed reflected on growing up Jewish: “The spirituality of Judaism was never presented to me, prayers were never explained, the role of women was never clear. Jewish spiritual practice never seemed inviting in any way.” Many people find that the spirituality of Judaism is not always available. If you cannot understand the prayers in synagogue, it is hard to be spiritual because you do not know what you are saying. Another JuBu told me, “I could not really connect the religion to all the political and social upheaval happening, and to my own day-to-day life.”

Because of the lack of spirituality in the lives of many assimilated American Jews, relating Judaism to day-to-day life can be difficult if you do not know or understand any lessons to apply. Author Sylvia Boorstein says, “My experience of religion had been that of a club membership, an extended family in which members supported each other in times of difficulty. I also had no idea that religion offered answers or, better yet, provided clues or technical instructions and guidance so that club members could discover the answers for themselves.”

I thought it would be helpful to look at the basic teachings of both Judaism and Buddhism, so I want to talk a little bit about the Ten Commandments and the central teaching of Buddhism, known as the Four Noble Truths. We are all familiar with the Ten Commandments, you know: You shall have no other gods before me; honor your father and mother; you shall not kill; you shall not steal. The Four Noble Truths are less familiar for many of us, they are: There is inevitable suffering in life; the origin of suffering is attachment; the cessation of suffering is attainable; and there is a path to the cessation of suffering.

The Ten Commandments are rules to live by; the Four Noble Truths offer insight into the human condition. Many Jews who are dealing with the pain and suffering of the Holocaust or in their own lives see the Four Noble Truths as a way to cope with the suffering. Sylvia Boorstein may speak for many JuBUs when she writes, “The first time I heard my Buddhist teachers explain the Four Noble Truths--beginning with ‘life is unsatisfying, painful by its very nature, unreliable even when it is pleasant because it is always changing’—I thought, they’re telling the truth. These people are talking about exactly what I’m worried about. They know what the real problem is and they promise a solution.”

This speaks to Humanistic Judaism too: we see life this way—realistically--with suffering, pain and randomness we can’t control. And if there’s one thing Jews know, it’s suffering. As my KidSchool teacher Rick likes to say about Jewish holidays, “They tried to kill us, we won, let’s eat.” It’s no surprise that so many Jews would be drawn to a spiritual practice that centers on understanding suffering. In the words of Sylvia Boorstein, “The Buddhism that had come to the west offered a clear explanation for suffering and tools for the direct, personal realization of a peaceful mind. It required practice, not affiliation. It was a great spiritual path. It promised transformation.”

Buddhism provides a way to try to live peaceably with our suffering and still maintain our original religion. In many ways, Judaism and Buddhism seem incredibly different. However if you know both religions, there are comparisons to be made and you realize that they are not that different. One person I interviewed said, “My experience of Judaism is that some concerns—like going to Heaven or Hell after you die, are not important. And this is similar to Buddhist practice.” Another Jubu had this to say about the two religions: “Both are about living your highest values and ideals—compassion and kindness to others, integrity with self. Both are about developing awe for the wholeness and wonder that is present in each moment. Both are about honesty and self-awareness in how we act in community with each other. Both see all life as interconnected.”

But in spite of the similarities in some of the beliefs, the practices are quite different. Of course I can't generalize from one person, but one of the Jubus I questioned said this about growing up Jewish: “My experience was superficial. We went to the temple for the high holidays; the women wore mink coats in the row behind us and talked throughout the service, which seemed incomprehensible to me.” One of the major differences in the religions that I have experienced is that in Buddhist practice, the participants are silent, getting in touch with their breathing, keeping to themselves and trying to be mindful in the moment. In Judaism, everyone is chanting the prayers, everyone has the same goal in their prayers (to talk to God), and the prayers are more of a group activity with a leader.

As I have been going to my friends' religious Bar Mitzvahs, I have been very aware of these differences. For me it has been distracting (during the service) to have everyone chanting (or even just one person, but into a microphone). This makes it difficult for anything to go on in my head. Sylvia Boorstein says: “I think it was inevitable that Jews studying Buddhism and discovering the tranquility, orderliness, and seriousness of meditation retreats would compare these new religious experiences with synagogue experiences.” For many Jews, the peaceful tranquility of Buddhist practice provides an attractive alternative to the noisy chaos of synagogue, and of day-to-day life.

The main practice of Buddhism is meditation. There are many different forms of meditation. However, the most common is sitting meditation. Sitting meditation is as simple as sitting down in a chair or on a cushion, closing your eyes and getting in touch with your breathing. Another common meditation is walking meditation. This is often done in a group. You walk slowly, stepping with your breathing (in, out, up, down). One thing the kids do at many retreats I have been to is pebble meditation, and it is a practice that I have always enjoyed. You take a specific detail about the pebble and relate it to a feeling (a smooth pebble could represent calmness) then you meditate on that pebble and it helps you be calm (because that is the emotion that you want the pebble to be). This is a very simple practice, where we use a pebble to help us focus on our breathing and clear our minds.

Many people, through meditation and breathing, find a sense of ease and calmness. One woman I interviewed said, “I was having difficulty in my life raising my children and without really knowing it, I was looking for some spiritual practice to become more grounded. I immediately knew that it was the practice for me in the first five minutes in the meditation hall--I think it was the joy I found in the awareness of the breath.” Many of the Buddhist retreats I have been to were run by a nun named Sister Annabel Laity, and in one of her dharma talks—the Buddhist equivalent to a sermon—she said: “Many scholars have talked a lot about the Four Noble Truths, and they have certain ideas concerning the Four Noble Truths. Really they are a practice and we don't have to be a scholar to understand it. We just need to be a practitioner. We don't even have to be a Buddhist. We just practice.”

One reason that Jews might be attracted, is that Buddhism is easy to practice. The way one person put it to me is: “I feel like I would need a massive ‘Jewish education’ to even know what the Jewish religion is about, whereas at my first meditation retreat, I felt like I could understand and even practice the teachings of Buddhism.” I had that experience too. Even at a young age, I was able to meditate for a few minutes. One of the people I interviewed said: “The practice of Buddhism offers a really concrete way of transforming suffering. My practice changed my life. I was angry and bitter about having a child with developmental disabilities and no one to help me, and also about the unkind treatment from my parents. After practicing for about five years, I finally felt enormous joy and gratitude and happiness in my life. I think that Judaism could offer all of these things too, but if it does, it is highly inaccessible and I didn't know how to find it.” These kinds of benefits from Judaism are out there, but many people find it hard to access and practice.

One thing I have noticed at the retreats I have been to is that the monks and nuns always seem happy. They love being with the kids and they seem so joyful in their practice. Sylvia Boorstein describes her experience of this: “The meditation practice that I learned from my Buddhist teachers made me less fearful and allowed me to fall in love with life, I discovered that the prayer language of “thank-you” that I knew from my childhood returned, spontaneously and to my great delight. From the very first day of my very first Buddhist meditation retreat, from the very first time I heard the Buddha’s elegant and succinct teachings about the possibility of the end of suffering—I was captivated, I was thrilled and I was reassured.” For many people one of the appeals of Buddhism is that the focus on the end of suffering can lead to joy. My dad told me that “Thich Nhat Hanh says often that if our practice is not bringing more happiness and more freedom than either we are doing it wrong or it is the wrong practice for us.”

For many Jews raised in the 60’s and 70’s, like my parents, when religion was “out of fashion,” the fact that Buddhism is not God-focused may be part of its appeal. In fact, my mom said: “A big attraction of Buddhism for me is that there is no God. Raised in an unreligious family, I really can’t relate to God as a being in the sky, or even a supreme being in the abstract. Buddha is not to be worshipped, but is just an embodiment of the teachings and the practice. Judaism puts a lot of faith in God, whereas Buddhism is about looking inward and basing the whole spiritual inquiry on direct experience rather than on faith.” The Buddhist teacher Arinna Weisman writes that the Buddha “never claimed to be a god or a messenger of god. One of the reasons his teachings are so powerful is that he was human like all of us, so we can see what is possible for us.”

For me, as a Jew who does not believe in God, Buddhism is a practice that I know will always be there in my life. Some Jews who are not comfortable with the topic of God or do not believe in God, are drawn to secular humanistic congregations like this one—that’s part of the reason we are here today.

I mentioned earlier the first of the Ten Commandments: You shall have no other gods before me. Because in Buddhism there is no God, Jews can practice Buddhism without betraying a core teaching of Judaism or their core identity as Jews. Buddhism does not ask people to trade one God or set of beliefs for another. This is a strong appeal for secular, cultural, humanistic Jews like me. One person I interviewed said: “At a retreat, what we mainly do is meditate. You are free to take or leave the other ‘cultural aspects’. I don't need to reject my Jewishness or accept a ‘new’ version of history, as I would be if I were embracing Christianity. And since we consider the teachings of the Buddha not as the ‘revealed word of a God’ there is no inherent conflict with my own religious upbringing.”

Many people, through meditation and Buddhist practice, have had insight into themselves and this has helped them with their Jewish practices. While some people may fear that when Jews turn to Buddhism they are turning away from Judaism, what I learned was that JuBus generally identify themselves as both Jewish and Buddhist. For everyone I talked to, there is no conflict. Sylvia Boorstein says that in her own personal experience she became closer to the Jewish religion by practicing Buddhism. She has been a Buddhist teacher for decades, and she says: "I never stopped being a Jew, and I have very affectionate feelings for Judaism. Years ago, though, I found myself frightened, alarmed about the fragility of life. Because it was the seventies and meditation and Eastern philosophy were becoming popular in the West, and I met some Buddhist teachers who spoke to the very issues I was frightened about. Before I met them, I didn't even know that it was spiritual understanding and spiritual solace that I was lacking. Maybe if I had known, I would have sought out a Jewish spiritual teacher." For me there is no conflict between being Buddhist and being a Jew. I am happy that I am able to practice in both traditions.

Jews have a long history of questioning authority and seeking answers. Turning to Buddhism is part of this tradition. Buddhism is just one of many answers that Jews are finding to their questions. I imagine that many members of this secular humanist congregation are looking for answers to the same questions that a lot of the JuBus I interviewed are asking. A member of my dad's Buddhist meditation community sums it up for me. She says, "My Buddhist practice helps me be a better Jew and better human being. I very much consider myself Jewish." I, too, feel this way, and believe that I will continue to benefit from being a part of both of these traditions.