

Rabbi Lewis' Message for November 2007

There is a book just out called *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. In the interest of full disclosure, I will tell you I have read the excerpts published in [Christian Century magazine](#) (whose cover is devoted to this book this month) but not the entire book. I have read enough to satisfy myself that I do not want to read further. The author's premise is my problem.

A.J. Jacobs (a self-professed secular agnostic Jew) writes, "One of the reasons that I embarked on this experiment was to take legalism to its logical extreme and show that it leads to righteous idiocy. What better way to demonstrate the absurdity of Jewish and Christian fundamentalism? If you actually follow all the rules, you'll spend your days acting like a crazy person." His goal was mockery and he has succeeded.

While I am no fan of fundamentalism of any sort, I am also no fan of how A.J. Jacobs interprets living biblically. He grows a beard, wears tassels and sandals, and carries a walking stick. When he reads Leviticus 20:27 ("They shall be stoned with stones, their blood shall be upon them"), he takes a handful of stones to Central Park with the idea of stoning a Sabbath-breaker or an adulterer. Even the most devoted card-carrying fundamentalist wouldn't think to do that. In addition, we don't know that these verses ever were meant to be taken literally. Jacobs tries on these laws for size as if it were a game. He plays it once or twice and goes on to the next things.

This approach is certainly not humble or meaningful in any way that I can discern, unless the meaning lies in book sales. Jacobs isn't following the Bible, he is living a parody of the Bible. Those of us who take living a religious life seriously would never dream of doing what Jacobs did. His book is the kind of book that gives religion a bad name.

Having said all that, I have to say reading the book made me think about many of the ideas that consume me over the high holy day period. We have come out of that period and have reached the month of Heshvan, a month notable for its lack of holidays. The only holidays in the entire month are the Shabbatot, a blessed relief from Tishri. Now that things are quiet, it is time to recall the promises we made to ourselves over the high holidays and to put that resolve into action.

What does it mean for us to live religiously every day, every week, every month? What does it mean to be Sabbath-observant as a liberal Jew? For us, living biblically lies not in being fundamentalists but in making a serious and thoughtful commitment to God, Torah and Israel. This is a much harder task than arbitrarily picking a law from Leviticus and throwing a few stones at people in Central Park.

And we know something else Jacobs doesn't know: We don't wrestle alone with these ideas. We work on them together, as a holy people, as the God of the Bible would have us do.

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