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Summer has just begun — a time that I once associated with languor, playing with friends, swimming every day, homemade Kool-Aid popsicles, running after the ice cream truck, games in the lingering twilight of “kick the can” with up to a dozen neighborhood kids, catching “lightning bugs” — today, as an adult, it goes all too fast. The time that used to stretch out before me in June with seeming amplitude now seems to be quickly slipping away before it has even begun. My husband and I, who both serve as Jewish clergy, have to begin thinking now about our High Holiday sermons, with the season known as the Days of Awe beginning on Sept. 24; we know that July and August will fly by in the blink of an eye. Why are these sermons so important? Don't we get the opportunity to teach and preach, and to write articles such as this one throughout the year? Yes, but there is a phenomenon within the Jewish community that may be unfamiliar to non-Jews, perhaps due to the strong ethnic component of being Jewish, and that is to regard the High Holidays as “Jewish check-in” time. There are many Jews in the United States who, while clinging to few, if any, facets of traditional Jewish beliefs or practices, nonetheless will show up and be counted as Jews on the two holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur.

A generation or so ago, rabbis would typically use the opportunities of these Days of Awe to try to inspire, seduce or “guilt” such congregants into coming to synagogue more frequently, into taking on more Jewish practices such as Sabbath observance or adherence to Jewish dietary laws. I have not conducted an in-depth study of this phenomenon, but I am fairly sure that these attempts rarely produced the hoped-for results. And so today we Jewish clergy ask ourselves, “What is the most important issue facing our world today? What message is the most crucial one to convey during this season when we can reach the greatest number of people in our community?”

Recently, a colleague was discussing this question with my husband, and the answer that came up was: the links between climate change, our dependence on fossil-fuels, and the general health of our Mother Earth. Of course we are concerned about the future of American Judaism (and world Jewry), but let's face it — there will be no Jews, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, or adherents of any other faiths if the planet turns inhospitable to human life. So yes, I would agree that this is one of the most important issues facing not only Jews but all people on the planet in our era.

And yet there is another issue that is almost as important. In a recent essay by Lord Jonathan Sacks (known as the “chief rabbi” of Great Britain), Sacks, reviewing Terry Eagleton's book “Culture and the Death of God,” worries aloud about the kind of faith traditions that will flourish in the 21st century. He writes:

“In the 21st century we will face a world of increasing religiosity of the most unreconstructed, pre-modern kind, whose devotees believe themselves to be commanded to convert or conquer the world. Too little has been done within the faith traditions themselves to make space for the kind of diversity with which we will have to live if humankind is to have a future. As religious groups turn inward under the impact of aggressive secularism, all that will be left will be the extremes.” (Jewish Review of Books, Volume 5, Number 2, Summer 2014)

Of course, Rabbi Sacks has in mind the many “holy wars” raging around the world today, the suicide bombers, the groups who hate others because they adhere to a different faith or even a slightly different brand of the same faith. At this point in time thousands, if not millions, of innocent people are being slaughtered, exiled, coerced, enslaved or made in one way or another to suffer because of the “religious” vision of others.

What a world! No wonder so many individuals in the “liberal” world have turned their backs on faith. And yet where there are no open-minded, liberal adherents of faith who value human rights, individual liberties, freedom and democracy, into this void rush adherents of a different sort of faith: extremists who have sealed themselves off from knowledge of the sciences, history, or of any kind of learning that would contradict their narrow reading of their Scriptures.

And so, the summer having just begun, I put in a plea not just to the Jews, but to all the community of Fall River and the SouthCoast — as we approach our shared holiday of the Fourth of July — to revisit your places of worship and to consider how to help them flourish as places where the values of democracy, freedom and the dignity of all human beings can be promoted and upheld alongside a spiritual tradition that gives meaning, comfort, challenge and direction to your everyday lives. Just as we need not cede the flag to the far right, so we ought not to abandon our religious heritages to those who would sow prejudice and violence amongst peoples. Happy Independence Day!