

Are We Religious? Rabbi Rebecca Qassim Birk

In the Jewish world denominations other than ours have tended to monopolise the adjective 'religious'. Liberal Jews are variously described as radical, inclusive, community minded, pioneering but rarely religious. Indeed there is almost a discomfort and awkwardness about the claim to be religious. Perhaps a 'left over' from the early prophetic call of our founders for our synagogues to be places of kindness, justice and compassion and for the ethical to trump ritual. *Let justice well up as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream.* (Amos 5:24)

And our synagogues are deeply committed to ethical values. In many food, clothing, and advice are offered to the vulnerable, the lonely befriended, and those without shelter given beds. Good work happens in our religious institutions, perhaps even *because* of them.

Yet liberal Jews are now negotiating new and old religious relationships as well. Issues of kashrut are considered with new ideas. We are encouraged to consider Shabbat observance in traditional and new ways, prayer is popular and Hebrew has returned substantially. Circumcision for our baby boys and male proselytes is considered and even common. Our thoughtful iconoclasm has not precluded an embrace of the religious, albeit creatively. Religiousness is the lens through which many of our activities are framed.

Our teacher Rabbi John Rayner, last century offered a definition of the word religious: *Fundamentally an attitude -a response with the whole of our being - mind, body and soul to the world in which we are placed.*

My question is for Liberal Jews today. Is it time to reclaim the description religious? Can we be proud of it?