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## *Interview with Rabbi Micah Greenstein*



**Q. When introducing Judaism to someone (friend or stranger), is there a particular tenet/belief you find yourself stressing?**

In introducing Judaism to someone, I find myself stressing the particular Jewish belief of ethical monotheism—the belief that there is one God whose principal demand and primary concern is the way we treat one another. Judaism teaches a way of living that promotes joy inside of us and ethical action toward others. Judaism's most important single teaching is that each human being is created in the image of God. Until Judaism brought this idea to the world, different values were placed on the lives of different classes of people. A serf was worth less than a landowner, men were wrongly favored over women. But the Jewish Bible insists that the intrinsic value of each individual life is the same.

**Q. What about describing Judaism to a child? How do you start?**

I start describing Judaism to a child with a jewelry box wrapped up like a present. I start this way because Judaism is like a treasure chest and being Jewish is the greatest gift. Judaism is sensory, so when children see the Chanukah lights, touch the torah scroll, taste Jewish holiday foods, hear joyful Jewish music, and smell the sweet spices that end the Sabbath each week, they begin to understand that Judaism is like a beautiful chain, the story of a family with links going back to God across space and time. At younger and younger ages, Jewish children begin to appreciate that they are the next link in the eternal chain of this never-ending story of the Jewish people.

### **About Rabbi Greenstein**

Rabbi Greenstein became Temple Israel's eighth Senior Rabbi in 2000, after serving as Temple's Assistant, Associate, and Youth Rabbi since 1991. He is currently the President of the Memphis Ministers Association and sits on the Executive Board of the National Civil Rights Museum. He teaches future ministers about Judaism as a faculty member at Memphis Theological Seminary. Micah is actively involved in Diversity Memphis' Prayers for Peace program, serving on the steering committee. He was named by Memphis Magazine as one of the city's most significant leaders.

Rabbi Greenstein has also served on the boards of the Central Conference of American Rabbis, United Way of the Mid-South, and advisory councils to MLG&W, the Junior League, and the Race Relations and Diversity Institute of Memphis. He is the President-elect of the Southwest Association of Reform Rabbis, which covers six states from Tennessee to Texas.

Before entering rabbinical school, Rabbi Greenstein was named a Kennedy Fellow at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, where he earned a Masters degree in Public Administration. He graduated from Cornell University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Economics with distinction in all subjects. He was ordained a Rabbi at the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion (HUC-JIR) in Cincinnati. His second Masters degree, a Masters of Arts in Hebrew Letters, was earned at the Los Angeles Campus of Hebrew Union College, following an intensive year of study in Israel.

Rabbi Greenstein has published a book chapter on Southern Rabbis and Black Civil Rights, and articles on Jewish theology, Zionism, Righteous Gentiles, and Southern Jewish history.

Rabbi Greenstein says that his greatest blessings are his wife Sheril, and their three children, Jake, Julia, and Cara

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**Q. What does Judaism have to say about tolerance, the acceptance of opposing beliefs (however mild or extreme)?**

Judaism compares God to the sunlight that shines through each of our religious windows in the cathedral of the world. A fundamentalist would say, "The light only shines through my window," and a fanatic would break all the other windows except for his own. Judaism says, "The light shines through every faith tradition," and our task is to affirm those of different faiths and beliefs whose actions speak for themselves. It may very well be, Judaism argues, not that we all believe the same or even believe what is right, but that we do what is right no matter what we claim to believe. Judaism's tolerance is reflected in its core belief that the ethical people of all religious traditions will go to heaven. In addition, minority opinions are always recorded along with majority opinions in the Talmud and other Jewish law codes. Judaism is a lifelong training course not just in how to talk to God, but even more, in how to hear the sound of God in the world and in one's life. As refractions of God's light, we are mortal and need to hear the voice of God and always affirm the image of God in those who are different and on opposing sides of issues. The great example of Jewish tolerance in action is the State of Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East. Its parliament, known as the Knesset, has among its members, secular and ultra-Orthodox Jews, Arab elected officials and female judges, and over twenty different political parties. The bottom line is that Judaism is tolerant by definition since the mission of the Jew has never been to make the world more Jewish; the Jewish mission is to make the world more human.

**Q. How does your faith handle/cope with natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina? How specifically does it offer comfort?**

Judaism offers comfort in the face of Katrina by offering the idea that God weeps with us, not against us. What kind of God would will a disaster on innocent life? What kind of God would will a young child cancer? A God Who is into child abuse?! God is about morality and meaning. Nature is amoral, therefore we do not look for God in disasters but in the sources of healing implanted within each of us. As big as the wave was that hit [the Gulf Coast], an even bigger wave of support, generosity, and outpouring emerged from the souls of people around the world. Judaism summons us to ponder the ways in which the power of faith and community can help us to face whatever befalls us in this lifetime.

**Q. The sanctity of life is a prevalent issue in United States politics, whether it's the debate over abortion rights or the preservation of life by artificial means. How does Judaism interpret these often-divisive topics for its followers?**

Judaism is at its best when it comes to wrestling with issues such as abortion and end of life. Take abortion for instance. Judaism is neither pro-choice nor pro-life. Judaism views the mother's life as always taking precedence over the fetus, and therefore permits the termination of a pregnancy when

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the mother's life is endangered. Judaism has a "permit but discourage" approach to abortion and capital punishment too. The alleviation of pain is a key criterion in comforting terminally ill patients. What is so admirable about Judaism is that it is thoughtful and deliberative, often dealing with issues on a case-by-case basis, rather than offering a facile and simplistic approach to these very serious and important issues surrounding the sanctity of life. Judaism is not a tradition of tragedy. It's a celebration of life. That's why when Jews cheer, we don't say "Cheers" or "Bottoms Up," we say instead, "L'chayim To Life!"

**Q. With religious differences at the center of so much world conflict today, how does your faith retain an "eye toward peace"?**

The one Jewish word everyone seems to know is "shalom." Peace is not just a strategy or means to a higher end. Peace in Judaism IS the higher end. Jewish tradition emphasizes three levels of peace - peace among the nations of the world, peace between family members, and the deepest level of all, inner peace. I have no doubt that if the world embraced the principles of Judaism, a world of unity without uniformity, a world where differences aren't just tolerated but celebrated, the world would achieve the peace it so desperately needs.

**Q. Are there any times when you find that more than faith is needed to understand a certain crisis or problem?**

Faith undergirds my life as a Jew, but in a moment of crisis or loss, the important Jewish question is not, "Why?" but rather "What now?" A grieving widow neither needs nor wants explanation. She needs consolation and a way to live that brings honor to the memory of her loved one. It's also not enough to have faith in solving the pressing problems facing Memphis. God has no other hands than ours to fix this broken world - it's our hands, not God's, that will continue improving our schools, feed the hungry, and shelter the homeless. Faith presumes that we need God. As much as we need God, God needs us. And that requires faith and action.

**Q. Are there tenets of your faith that you, personally, find either confusing or humorous?**

There's an old joke that where there are two Jews, there are three opinions! I find it funny that Jews never cease to disagree, sometimes without even being disagreeable!

**Q. Has there been an occasion when someone new to Judaism has surprised you with an interpretation, or opened your mind to something you hadn't considered before?**

Whenever someone new to Judaism studies with me, I always learn something I hadn't thought of before. One woman who embraced Judaism in her sixties after a period of study said to me, "Rabbi, this Judaism is the world's best kept secret!" Another emphasized Judaism as a religion of "ethical optimism," the notion that human beings can rise above their bad impulses to improve this world for the better. While this idea wasn't new to me, the way she presented it certainly was.

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Q. If you had to identify a "weakness" of your faith, what would that be? Can there even be such?

I find it remarkable that the Jewish Bible is the only sacred Scripture I know of where followers of a faith have canonized its critics. All the other faiths, whether it's the New Testament or the Koran, praise their adherents. The Jewish Bible doesn't hide the weaknesses of its followers. We make mistakes. We complain. We forget to be the blessings we are supposed to be, but God always takes us back, no matter how mortal and fallible we are at times. I guess the weakness of Judaism is that it is a thinking person's faith and that doesn't make it popular. Judaism is a life system that encourages spiritual awareness and moral passion, which is why its strengths are so many and its weaknesses so few.

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### The Guest Interviewer



Frank Murtaugh is Managing editor at Memphis Magazine, the father of two daughters and a frequent contributor to the magazine and The Memphis Flyer online. He is also a founder of Diversity Memphis. Frank's father was from Memphis and Frank was born in Knoxville, his parents were graduate students at UT. He spent some years in Atlanta, his parents later went to Emory. He then spent a year in northern Italy, three years in southern California and his high school years in Northfield, Vermont, where he met his future wife, Sharon. Frank graduated from high school in '87, Tufts University (Boston) in '91. He moved to Memphis in June '91. and was hired at MEMPHIS magazine in May '92. Sharon and he were married June 11, 1994, in Vermont!

His daughters are Sofia (6) and Elena (3). With their mother, the lights of his life. Frank has been involved in the community in a number of different ways. He agreed to be our first interviewer and his questions are from the perspective of someone who professes only minimal knowledge of religion, especially Judaism.