

High Holy Days 5782/2021
Kol Nidre Sermon
Cantor Harriet Dunkerley
Temple B'nai Chaim

God or What's Faith Got to do With It?

My cousin Hinda does not believe in God. She has said that she wishes she could believe, could have faith in God or a higher power, but she just doesn't. For her, that kind of faith doesn't exist as something that is even possible. Yet, I remember attending the B'nai Mitzvah of all three of her children, and she has enthusiastically followed my cantorial pursuits from the moment she learned I was considering this path. She has been a member at a large Reform Congregation in Washington, DC for at least 40 years and still attends services occasionally, especially when her son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren go. Growing up, our families celebrated Passover together. She considers herself ritualistically and culturally very Jewish, finding comfort and grounding through the beauty and regularity of Jewish ritual and the anchor provided by the cycle of our calendar. And she recognizes the miracles of birth, natural wonders and a night sky filled with a zillion stars. She just doesn't see God in them.

Does that make her a "bad Jew"? How important is a belief in God anyway? Can we be "good Jews" without one?

Before we answer those questions, I think it is important that we look at another fundamental distinction which may provide greater insight – the difference between faith and belief – especially as it relates to the question of God. According to award winning author Rea Nolan Martin, the two terms are closely related, but certainly not the same. Belief is a product of the mind, but faith is not. Faith is a product of the spirit, the practice of which is often hampered and even derailed by belief. To have faith in the worst of times will no doubt require us to silence, or at least quiet, the mind. Faith is what prevails when our beliefs run aground. The spirit can be buoyed by our beliefs, and it can also be brought down by them when they prove inadequate, as they most certainly will at some point in the journey. Even the beliefs humans have held most closely have waxed and waned over the course of a lifetime or a millennium. Think leeches as a cure for a host of medical infirmities or Galileo's theory of Copernican Heliocentrism which was considered heretical and widely rejected in his day for example. Our beliefs are often narrow and rooted in culture and upbringing. Sometimes our most closely held beliefs are in direct conflict with everything else we know to be true.

Which is why beliefs come and go. Even our individual experiences with the same so-called truth can contradict each other, and over time as we grow and as new information is discovered, former truths or beliefs can be revealed as irrelevant, false or arbitrary – *slavery, gender and race inequality, polygamy, Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy, and previously sanctioned abuses by social, political and religious authorities* – to name a few. "Beliefs shift because beliefs are modeled on personal and/or communal experience. And a belief, just because it has been handed down to us, is not necessarily true even when we think it is. Or more clearly, it is

not necessarily the only truth.”¹ Faith on the other hand is not so easily swayed. It is deeper than a statement of beliefs; it is quite simply, a state of being that transcends belief, sometimes even in spite of it. Faith is akin to moving through life unknowing – having leapt out of a plane without any certainty or preconception of the outcome. Faith is trusting beyond all evidence and reason that you have not been abandoned. And because of its inherent abstract nature, faith is perhaps best practiced (or achieved) through commitment and experience. One cannot ever really know the validity of a firmly held belief in an abstract truth because our humanity limits us. Which is okay because knowing doesn’t create faith. In fact, the opposite – not knowing – does. Meaning, in the midst of a crisis, it is impossible to know what God, or the universe is asking of us. Yet, in the liminal space of ‘unknowing’, one might still ask, “*What does God want of me? Or is it even God that is asking? Or circumstance? What is the meaning of it?*” The answer of faith – “It doesn’t matter!” It is unknown in the moment and may never be known. This unknowing, in the context of faith is a surrender requiring humility and openness to learning – the acceptance of our human vulnerability and utter lack of real control over most things unfolding in our universe. It is incredibly freeing and at times, terrifying because if faith does not fill in the empty space, fear certainly will. Faith quiets the mind of human chatter and arrogance leaving space for acceptance of the unknown.

So, what does this have to do with religion, Judaism, and specifically the question of belief or faith in God? In a discussion about the distinction between belief and faith, Alan Watts, in his book, *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*, writes,

“In general practice, belief has come to mean a state of mind which is almost the opposite of faith. Belief, as I use the word here, is the insistence that the truth is what one would “lief” or wish it to be. The believer will open his mind to the truth on the condition that it fits in with his preconceived ideas and wishes. Faith, on the other hand, is an unreserved opening of the mind to the truth, whatever it may turn out to be. Faith has no preconceptions; it is a plunge into the unknown. Belief clings, but faith lets go. In this sense of the word, faith is the essential virtue of science, and likewise of any religion that is not self-deception.”²

If, as Watts suggests, to live in reality is to open the mind to truth, in other words, to faith, then it follows that one can only know God through faith and not through belief, because, according to Watts, God is accessible only through an open mind. It makes sense – just as one can only see the sky when looking from outside, through an open window or clear glass, one must remain open or “clear” to “see” God. If the glass is covered, even partially with a shade or with paint for example, the sky is not visible. Let us not then resist the scraping of the paint from the glass – that is the letting go of any belief in or about God. Rather, I invite my cousin Hinda, and all who share her thoughts vis-à-vis “belief in God,” to open to it and at least embrace the distinction that this is in reality an opening to faith. It is curious and wonderful that, much like science, religious teachings and spiritual philosophies from many faith traditions reveal that abandonment of belief, of any clinging to a future life for one’s own, and of any attempt to

¹ *Faith and Belief Are Not the Same*, Rea Nolan Martin, The HuffPost Blog, December 26, 2013.

² *The Wisdom of Insecurity: A Message for an Age of Anxiety*, Alan Watts, Vintage Books, January 1, 1988.

escape from mortality, is a regular and expected stage of the spirit. This is faith. Indeed, this is a fundamental principle of spiritual life and, as Watts pointed out, an absolute opening of the mind to truth, regardless of the outcome. It is the ability to sit in the unknown and bear witness to what is occurring, much like a scientist in the middle of an experiment. Faith is questioning without attachment to the answer.

So then, can Cousin Hinda still be a “good Jew” if she doesn’t believe in God? And the “God” in which she doesn’t believe... what God is that? What is she (or anyone) picturing when they say, “I don’t believe in God”? Is it the ancient looking white-haired man with a long beard who sits on a cloud and hands out judgement, reward and punishment; or perhaps the figure with arm outstretched touching fingers with Adam on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel – that commanding, wrathful God of our High Holiday *Machzor* (prayer book) that many of us, myself included, struggle with particularly because of its prominence in our Yom Kippur liturgy? Well, at the intersection of belief and faith, the answer? It really doesn’t matter. It’s just a belief – an idea – that may or may not be grounded in reality. In fact, the whole concept of the individual God that one believes in, or doesn’t, may have morphed significantly since we first pictured God as a child.

So too has the communal concept of God changed over the millennia, along with the centrality of a belief in that God to Jewish spirituality and practice. Erich Fromm, in his radical interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, *You Shall Be as Gods*, describes how God becomes progressively less real (and relevant) in traditional Jewish literature. At the beginning of the Bible, God is an absolute ruler who can (and does) destroy the world when God is not happy with it. In the next stage, however, God relinquishes absolute power by making a covenant with humankind. God’s power is limited because it is subject to the terms of the covenant.

The third stage of God’s evolution (or devolution) comes in God’s revelation to Moses, in which God presents as a nameless God. The evolution of God does not stop with the Bible. Ironically, Maimonides, the great 12th century Jewish philosopher, takes it even further by positing that nothing can be said about God. We can venture to say what God isn’t, but God’s positive attributes are unthinkable.

The next step, says Fromm, should have been a rejection of God completely, but Fromm himself – a self-declared non-theistic mystic – acknowledges that this is impossible for religious Jews. He does, however, recognize that because Judaism has not been primarily concerned with beliefs per se, one who does not “believe in God” can still live a life that is fully Jewish in spirit.³

Abraham Joshua Heschel in a sense rejects any thought of belief as paramount to Jewish practice, focusing instead on Awe and Radical Amazement. “Radical amazement,” according to Heschel has a wider scope than any other act of humankind, including belief”. Faith and awareness begin with wonder, the greatest hindrance to which is belief. “Awe,” says Heschel, “is the very root of faith.” Awe in a word, precedes faith, according to Heschel. We must grow

³ “Must a Jew Believe in God?” *The Centrality of God in Judaism may not be as Straightforward as you Think*. Daniel Septimus, My Jewish Learning, September 2021.

in awe to be guided by faith.⁴ Heschel teaches the meaning of what I call faith – the meaning of awe –

“Is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the Divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the Eternal.”⁵

So, although Cousin Hinda may not believe in a version of an undefinable Being called God that transcends us and all created things, I would argue that upon closer review of the journey of her life, faith – awe as Heschel would call it – has sustained her more often than any belief may have failed her. On this Yom Kippur, and throughout our new year 5782, may you be blessed with the courage to question your beliefs and perhaps where appropriate, release those that no longer serve you in favor of the inner calm that comes with having the faith to know that whatever is occurring right now will not be lost or forgotten, rather it will unfold, be witnessed and acknowledged in the fullness of its truth over time.

G'mar Chatimah Tovah... may you be sealed for blessing and blessed with faith.

⁴ *Wonder and Awe: The Radical Amazement of Abraham Joshua Heschel with Rabbi Mike Comins*. April 24, 2021, Wilderness Torah Center for Earth Based Judaism.

⁵ *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*, Abraham Joshua Heschel, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976.