

Shanah Tovah. (G'mar Tov.)

I want to **begin today**, by asking everyone to get comfortable... **Not** because this is going to be a long, doozy of a sermon. But because I want to **ask you a question** – and I want you to focus on *your* answer to this question. Close your eyes, if you're comfortable. I want you to **think** about this **one question** – and I want you to know that, by my even *asking* this question, I am taking a risk, for my **job security** here at Adath Israel. So **think long and hard** – because I know that **I'VE thought long and hard** about whether and how I should ask this question. **Ready? Here goes** – here is the **question**:

WHY ARE YOU ALL HERE?

Why are you here? What are you doing here? This place, this day, this service, its rituals and language... **I don't take your presence for granted at all** – in fact, in many ways, I think it's a little **crazy**. It's certainly not rational, not grounded in good economics, or good logic. I mean, **I don't take attendance**, I don't keep score, but I *do* help with setting up the extra chairs here for the holidays – so I know that, if it's not amortized over a year of constant shul-going, this is a pricey ticket you're enjoying right now... like **Hamilton pricey!**

Why are you here? I mean, that's *THE* question, right? Is it just **intergenerational inertia** that drags you back here each year? It's **gotta be more** than that, doesn't it? I know I'm not really helping my case as a rabbi here by asking this, but I am amazed!

Is it the **old joke** – *New Rabbi, meeting congregants for the first time, asks that same question – why do you like coming to shul; one man says, "Let me introduce you to Mr. Goldstein": "Goldstein here comes to shul to talk to God; I come to talk to Goldstein."* Are you Goldstein? Or did you reserve seats to make sure you're sitting *next to* Goldstein? Don't get me wrong; there is a **highly communal draw** to this place – the word for synagogue in Hebrew is **not Beit Tefillah**, house of prayer – it's **Beit Knesset** – which means, loosely, the gathering-place, the water cooler, the hangout. There are a lot more people who come to talk to Goldstein than come to talk to God – so much so that we really named this place for the people who come to be with Goldstein.

I'm calling this question – because if we *cannot* come up with an answer, then we're in real trouble. And it's **risky** – because once I call this question, I *better* have an answer. But like any one of the **lawyers** in this room would advise me – I am only asking this question because it's a **question whose answer I think I know**. I think I've figured it out – THE ONE reason why we're all here. **ONE uniting impulse** that could define every one of us – the **Goldsteins, the Goldstein-Whisperers, all** of us.

I **stumbled** upon *my* answer accidentally – but the second it hit me, I knew I had to bring it to you all today. I was reading the newest **book** by the centrist Israeli scholar Yossi Klein HaLevi (who has been a visiting scholar here several times, most recently for the fiftieth Yom Yerushalayim). Yossi's new book is called **Letters to My Palestinian Neighbor**, and Yossi opens the book by lamenting that, nowadays, he cannot have an open conversation with the Palestinians who live just one hill over from him. There is **too much Palestinian hatred** for an Israeli like him to just walk over to his neighbor. He had done that for a previous book in the 1990s, before the Second Intifada convinced Israelis that their neighbors were not currently peace partners.... Before a half-dozen Israeli overtures of peace in the late '90s and early 2000s – withdrawal from land, offers even to negotiate Jerusalem, in the late '90s – had been rebuffed and answered with terror. Disillusioned, saddened, Yossi Klein HaLevi says to his imagined neighbor, essentially, **"I cannot visit you, we cannot talk** – so I'm writing you these ten letters – to try to **explain who I am**, and to try to reach out to understand who you are."

It's a beautiful book – and in the second letter, Yossi Klein HaLevi is explaining to his imaginary Palestinian neighbor and letter-recipient **why millions of Jews** – from secular Russians to kabbalistic Yemenites, Ultra-Orthodox extremists who do not believe that a State of Israel can exist without the Messiah, to Reform and Conservative Women of the Wall who seek a place to practice their legitimate version of Judaism – **why do we all care so much about the Kotel?** Why did we, over centuries, risk our lives, face persecution? Why do we keep at it so much? And if we're assimilated, why did we not give it *all* up, the last vestiges of our Jewish connection? Why do secular Jews, hanging on to Jewish faith by a thread, care about the Kotel? Looking at the Kotel, Yossi asks, *Why are we Jews still here?*

And then, he offers a **beautiful explanation** of why we're here. He says, **[POSTERS] *Im ein ma'aminim hem, b'nei ma'aminim hem.*** All of us – if we ourselves are not believers, then we are the descendants of believers, part of the people of this faith.

Im ein ma'aminim hem, b'nei ma'aminim hem – If we ourselves don't believe, don't observe – we are **descendants of believers**. We *come from* this belief system, even if we are **not currently doing** it. Yossi Klein HaLevi was describing why Israelis are so passionate about their Jewish identity – but as I read that line, I thought to myself, *Holy schwarma – that's it. That's why everyone comes here. That's what brings us back together: If not ourselves believers, then we come from it. We are part of it, descended from it.*

In this room, I know: There are some people who are **deep believers**. Some people buy in. **These** are the **ma'aminim** – the believers. That word – *ma'aminim* – look in the middle of it – it has the word “**amen**” in it. “**Amen**” or “*Emunah*” means faithful acclamation. When we say “*amen*,” we're saying, “We're in. We truly believe what was just said.”

But **[raise MY hand]** is there **anyone in this room** who, sometimes, at least **a little bit, struggles** with whether we really believe in certain articles of Jewish faith, or the fantastical, miraculous stories of our tradition. Have we ever heard some fanciful explanation of a Jewish law or story, and said to ourselves, “**really?**...” Have we **ever wondered** – privately or aloud – if the picture of God that Judaism paints is one we can fully say “*amen*” to?

I know **I struggle** with faith sometimes. I bet there are people in this room who live with **that nagging inconsistency**: We like our Judaism – *buuuut*, some of the stuff feels a little off, a little quaint, not modern. We *feel* very Jewish – *buuuut*, maybe we don't do *all 613* of the *mitzvot*. Sometimes, *other* values, *other* priorities, *other* realities pull us in *other* directions.

And I'm here today to say to you: **THAT'S OKAY**. Because *even if* you are in a moment of **questioning**, or a moment of **rejection** – even if you are *not* feeling like you're one of the **true ma'aminim today** – you are *certainly* one of the *b'nei ma'aminim* – the descendants of it. You **come from it**. And even if you were **not born Jewish**, you are part of it – because you have **embraced this heritage**, this People... It is **still our legacy**. It is **precious** to us. If it's **not** in our **DNA**, it's certainly in our *kishkes*. The word “*b'nei*” does **not** mean **literal, genetic children**, here; it means **nation, People**. We are the **People** of the *ma'aminim*. We either **have faith** – or at least, we **come from faith** – and that *also* is enough to **connect** us. To **sustain** us. To be **meaningful** to us, **precious** to us.

And *even if* you **do count yourself** among the *ma'aminim*: As I reflected on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, sometimes just **pure belief is not enough**. Sometimes **faith is not enough**. Because *every* human experience of pain and loss, every logic-based observation of our world, **every modern distraction** from the **wonder** that **nurtures belief** – every bit of it **flies in the face** of pure, unquestioning belief. Sometimes we **need more than our faith**. Sometimes we need to feel like we're part of a **broad, deeply-rooted family tree**, that **connects us, embraces us**, *even* as we question. If we have doubt, or ambivalence, that can be okay – so long as it still connects

us. Novelist Jonathan Safran Foer tells the story of his six-year-old son, who asked **if Moses was a real person**. “**I don’t know,**” says the father, “**but we’re related to him.**”

“I don’t know if Moses is real – but we’re related to him.” “He’s **one of us**, we’re **one of his squad**.” Can we see ourselves **that close** to one another – no matter who we are, how much we believe – can we see ourselves as **related** to one another, **descendant** of one another, **even with our doubts** and divisions?

We live in such a **fractious time** – everything, **every idea, every affiliation, every word** seems only to divide us, from **within**. We also live in the first time when **very real anti-Semitism**, as an **external threat** – in Europe, in the community of nations, and rising in our own country – when this **external hatred** that **always drew us together** against a **common enemy** is having the **opposite effect**, as Jews distance ourselves from one another, **too uncomfortable with one another** to see the common threat. And *worst of all*, we live in a time when **apathy** and **indifference, emotional fatigue** from all the rhetoric and fighting and polemics have just **worn us down** – such that the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel feel **ominous** and prophetic, when he warned, “**The opposite of good is not evil; the opposite of good is indifference.**”

In such a world, we need a **really good reason** to be here today, to sustain this faith – because it would be **all too easy** to just be **too busy** or **too tired** or **disillusioned** or **ambivalent** to come. I could give you a **million reasons NOT to be here** today: The **cost**, other pressing business, the fact that Judaism, if we were honest with ourselves, is not THE sole, definitive source of the way we live our lives on a daily or weekly basis. And **yet, we’re here**. And I believe the reason we’re here can be defined by that one line: *Im ein ma’aminim hem, b’nei ma’aminim hem*. If it’s **not completely** who we are, it’s what we’re **part of**, that **draws us back** here.

The Israel that Yossi Klein HaLevi describes – *and* this beautiful community I see before me today – **WE**, like Israel, have **among us both ma’aminim** – and people who, with our doubts and ambivalences, *still* see ourselves as **part of, descendant of, derivative of, the ma’aminim**.

That’s what binds us together, and brings us here. *Im ein ma’aminim hem, b’nei ma’aminim hem*. We are **Goldstein**, and we come to talk to Goldstein. And we **think Goldstein is meshuggeh** for his Jewish beliefs, or maybe for his political beliefs, or maybe for his quirky personality – but we **feel very strongly** that he is **OF us**, **he IS us**. And **if anyone messes with Goldstein**, they are **messing with us** – because, like Jonathan Safran Foer’s connection to Moses, we’re all **related, precious, dear** to one another, and to this legacy.

In our b’nei ma’aminim, our People, we have **cultural Jews**, and **traditionally-observant Jews**.... We have people on the **left** and people on the **right**... We have **ardent Zionists**, and we have those who are **intimidated** by the way that **Israel** has become such a **wedge issue**, and **shy away** from it... We have people who are **married**, people who are **not married**, people who **were married**, to people of **opposite gender** or **same gender** or some other definition of gender... We have people who are **married to Jewish people** who are **not themselves Jewish**, but are **here, supportive, loving, curious**... We have people who are **wealthy**, and people who **wish** they could contribute more materially to our community, but who **DO give their souls** and their **time** to the spirit of this place... We have people who are in **pain**. I’m not sure if, in truth, we have anyone who has **never experienced pain** – but if so, good for you, and you’re part of it too.

But **wherever we are** – **here**, in Israel, in Europe, or one of those last two Jews said to be in Kabul, Afghanistan – neither of whom will leave because each refuses to let the other claim the last remaining Torah scroll and the bragging rights (“*I refuse to die and let that guy win!*”) – **Wherever we are**, we **ALL fit this same phrase**: Either we are **of the faithful**, or we are refusing to give up, we come back each year, because we are **rooted in that faith**.

But now – here’s the **last**, and **most painful part** of that **question**, of **why we’re here**: If we’re **not *ma’aminim***, if we’re not all in, is that **descendancy** from that faith **strong enough**? If it’s just nostalgia, the past – well, I’ll tell you – *nostalgia just ain’t what it used to be....*

Is it enough to be here because we **come from it**? **Is it enough** to say, “Not on my watch, I won’t let this streak fade, this chain be broken” - ? **As your Rabbi**, I can tell you: **This question is what keeps me up at night**. Not the question of will YOU come – but a question that **cuts to the core** of my **Jewish insecurity**, my most **vulnerable, raw fear**: I fear that our – **ALL of our** – **children and grandchildren** won’t feel it enough to come, to see themselves, even if they doubt, even if they are not *ma’aminim* – **Will they see themselves as *b’nei ma’aminim***, as part of it?

Let’s have a **moment of honesty** (*not a spectator sport*): **[HANDS]** Who in this room is **afraid** of that? Who in this room is **not 100% certain** that our children and grandchildren will feel the same pull that we feel to this room, on this day? **It terrifies me**. And we have it **in common** with the **modern liberal, centrist Jews of Israel**, too – they are not certain that their children and grandchildren will feel the same pull. That, we can learn from one another – because *they* have the **people-hood** part down, but *without* the rootedness of **religion** – and **we** have the **religious** rites here, but *not* always the **peoplehood**.

How many of us **fear an inexorable, ongoing dilution** – such that, if we are **not *ma’aminim***, but *b’nei ma’aminim* – and then our children are *b’nei b’nei ma’aminim* – this **generational decline** will eventually **dilute us out of existence**? That’s what scares me. Even as your Rabbi: I pray, I live in a way that strives to **stack the deck, tip the scales in favor of Jewish continuity** for my community (*I try to be an over-achiever in the whole “Jewish Continuity” thing*), my own family – but I can’t give you a sure thing.

I **don’t** mean to be a **downer**: I believe that **we are here because** we’re **sincere** in our **faith** or **practice**, and because we wish to **re-up our connection**, our line, our **descendancy**, *from* that faith.... **AND we’re here because** we are somewhere between **hopeful** and **terrified** about whether, in **two generations**, our descendants will feel as strongly about it as we do.

And I’ll tell you, we **come by it honestly**: The historian **Szymon Rawidowicz** once called the Jews the “**Ever-Dying People**” – that in every generation, *that* generation of Jews is convinced that **we are the last** of the Jews, that it will all flicker out after we’re gone, turn out the lights on your way out,... and then, **that next generation** *does* come along, does its Judaism, in its *own* way, and part of *that* generation’s Judaism is to be **certain** that ***it*** is the last generation of Jews.

We **come by this neurosis honestly**, we **come from a long line of neuroses** – going all the way back to the third generation of the Jewish People. There is a story about **Jacob**, on his **deathbed**, gathering his sons around, convinced that they would not carry on the tradition, that it would **die with him**. Jacob, whose **other earned name is Yisrael, Israel**, is *convinced* that Judaism would be a **three-generation historical blip**, to end with him. But his **sons gather around**, and reassure their father, who is Jacob, a.k.a. Israel, by saying: “***Shema Yisrael – Listen, Israel, Jacob, Dad***, we get it: ***Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*** – we know that Adonai, alone, is our God.”

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. To which Yisrael, Israel answers: “*Baruch shem k’vod malchuto l’olam va’ed* – Praise God’s Name – for all time.”

For all time - but **why** are we **so insecure** about lasting “for all time” - ? Maybe it’s because **we care about it too much** to take it for granted. That’s why ***I’m*** so amazed by your presence here – because I **care so deeply** about your presence here. Because I see you, each and every one of you, as the Torah teaches, as ***morashah kehillat Ya’akov*** – as the proud legacy of the People of Jacob, also known as Yisrael, Israel.

And **not** just a legacy of **believing**, but of **struggling**, of **ambivalence**. Do you know what Yisrael means? It means the one who **wrestles**, who **struggles** with God. Adath Israel – *Adat Yisrael* – we are the Community of strugglers. (*Would be a great name for a Jewish wrestling team, if such a thing ever existed...*) Even Jacob, Israel, 4000 years ago, was **struggling with faith** – even *before* he was **convinced that his kids wouldn't carry it on, he struggled**. He struggled, I don't know if he always believed – but I know he **came from believers** **[POINT TO 2nd POSTER]** – he came from Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca.

He **reached back to the beginning** of it all, and yet he **struggled** with faith, and then he **worried** that there would be **no more faith after him**. And *yet*, there *was* that **continuity** – because **he came from it**, because *we* **come from it**. Because *even* when we are **ambivalent**, we are **part of it**, it is **part of us**, in our *kishkes*.

Isn't that what this moment of **Yizkor** is all about? Yizkor is about **remembering** who we **are**, what we **came from**. We **reach backward**, **unsure**, **seeking** some sense of **strength**, **spirit**, **legacy** from those who came before us, whom we miss so – praying that it will **empower** and **affirm our generation**, and **all generations that come next**. In this moment of Yizkor, we **position ourselves** at the **cusp** – between what *was*, what is **lost but not forgotten** – and what we pray *will be*, if we do our part by **remembering** and sustaining that legacy. Our presence here at Yizkor, it **stacks the odds** in our favor for future *b'nei ma'aminim*.

That's **where we are** right now: At Yizkor, we stand at the **cusp of Jewish continuity** – where **the past meets the as-yet-undetermined future** of Judaism. It's so much bigger than the Kaddish at the end: It's about **standing between the past that we remember, and the future that we hope will remember us....** Part of that chain of continuity.... **[REPEAT] Between the past that we remember, and the future that we hope will remember us...**

So please, as we now begin Yizkor, I'll ask you to **rise** (if you are able) and **stand** in this critical space, this **crux of Jewish continuity, with me**. **Stand here, recalling the past**, even as we are **unsure of the future**. Stand in memory of those *ma'aminim* and *b'nei ma'minim*, and **fellow doubters** and **strugglers** and **wrestlers**, with all their contradictions and ambivalences and neuroses that we inherited from them – Stand up because **we owe them** that much, as we can **only see the future, chart the future**, if we **climb upon their shoulders**. Stand up **NOT because we owe them** some misplaced Jewish **guilt** – but because of **Jewish PRIDE**. Because of **Jewish LOVE**. Stand up – and to strengthen our resolve at this moment of Yizkor, **say with me, say *after me***, these words that describe us all, together, in this room:

[Encourage people to stand; REPEAT THE PHRASES] I may have faith... but if not... I come from faith.... I stand here... NOT because of Jewish **GUILT**.... I stand here... because of Jewish **PRIDE**.... Because of Jewish **LOVE**.... Love for what has been. Love for what can still be....

Friends, Yizkor is *not* only about what has **been**. It's about what **can still be**. As we stand for Yizkor, at this **cusp between past and future**, this **crux of Jewish continuity** – I pray that **whether as *ma'aminim*, or as *b'nei ma'aminim***, whatever we are that brings us here, we **find ourselves here** for the **right reasons**, and we **leave here poised for a future** that **honors the legacy** of the **loved ones** whom we **now remember**. *Keyn yehi ratzon* – So may it be God's will. And let us say: **AMEN**.