

Shanah tovah.

It is **so wonderful** to see you all here today, and to know that there are many other **hundreds** of people joining us **online**. **We're back!** Doing all the **crazy rituals** that Jews do on the High Holidays and throughout the year. I mean, *whether* you've done them **all your life**, or you **joined** Judaism **later in life**, or you're here because you **love someone** who's Jewish – can we all **admit** it for a moment: the rituals, the things we do Jewishly – some of them are **pretty nuts, right?** Do they ever seem **primitive? Tribalistic?** When I was a rabbinical student, the **seminary synagogue** had **big, beautiful windows** that looked out, across Broadway, to the Manhattan School of Music. Sometimes on a hot day, with windows open, you could hear an **oboist** practicing... but it also meant that **they could see us**. As dozens of us processed on Sukkot, chanting and waving and shaking and shuckling with our lulav and Etrog, I sometimes wondered: **What must they be thinking of Judaism right now? Are we as crazy as this all seems?**

So to start out today, I want you to **give me some** of the **really nutty Jewish practices** or beliefs, that have always made you scratch your head, or ask, *do we really still do that?!... C'mon – shout 'em out: Any of the crazy stuff that's on the books – maybe it's well-established, maybe not so wide-spread. Shout 'em out... [TAKE RESPONSES: filler – my kappores experience... even kippah (show them "place on head" kippah)...]*

*Okay, we can't let this go on too long – as a Rabbi, I feel like I have to somehow **redeem** this whole "Judaism is crazy" moment... otherwise it's bad for business.* But actually – it's **not bad** at all. I **KNOW** that many, if not **MOST** of the people here, are at least **a LITTLE skeptical** about some of the things we do Jewishly. Most of us, in our community, **don't swallow** this **whole** Judaism thing without some **doubts**, or questions, or **ambivalence**, or **skepticism**.

And **skepticism** in **today's world** is **understandable**. With the amount of completely **puffed-up, ego-fueled, self-certain tone** of discourse we take in – people with **minimal expertise** speaking and posting in **absolutes**, with **unquestioned bravado**, "often wrong but never in doubt," as my father would say... Too often, we act as if we are bigger and smarter than the mystery and awe of the world around us... **immune to disease, more powerful than war**. So many **self-anointed "experts"** – polluting the waters of true, proven, thoughtful expertise... people speaking and posting and pontificating with such certainty, and yet with such **contradictions** of one another and **vilification** of one another, that if we're **trying to understand our world** by **reading** or **listening** to what's out there, we feel like a **ping-pong ball, volleyed** back and forth between different sets of **opinions masquerading as incontrovertible fact**. **Who WOULDN'T** start to doubt?! A world with so much **self-contradictory fact**, with no tolerance for nuance – it's ripe for skepticism!

So, as we begin these Days of Awe, this time of **personal, vulnerable, self-assessment**, this season of **Confession** (you know, *"Tis the season to be sorry, abababa-ay-ay-ay-Oy-vey"*): Here's **MY confession**, *even* as your Rabbi: Sometimes, **I too... doubt**. I **don't know whom** to believe, what to think. And it makes me **worry** about whether the **truths**, the **reassuring beliefs** and **timeless morals** that have grounded us, that serve as the **tent pegs firm** in the ground, even when the **tent** was **flapping** in the storm – sometimes, I'm not so sure of it all, either. If **Judaism** is **supposed** to give us the **answers** to the **BIG questions** we have (*Why do bad things happen to good people? What happens when we die? Is there a God, and what's that like? Why do we do the crazy rituals we do – are we expecting reward... or punishment, if we don't?*) – Sometimes, **even I am not 100%**.

I should tell you what I tell our **teens**, when we talk about getting caught up with **dangerous leaders**, cults, or other forms of idolatry: I tell them: If **anyone** offers you **quick-and-easy, 100%-guaranteed** answers to these sorts of questions – that's a religion and a leader to **avoid** – run far, run fast. But I **understand the allure** of certainty, even if it's misleading and dangerous. How do we **instill strength of conviction** in our children, in ourselves – when *every time* we answer a **tough question**, it starts with, *"Weeeeeelllll...."*

So today, *joining you* with more questions than self-assured answers, I want to offer a **model of religion** for all you skeptics out there. All of **US skeptics**... A **model of faith** for these **modern, doubting, cross-your-arms, roll-your-eyes, lean back and prove it to me** times... For why living Jewishly makes a lot of **sense**... According to this model, at least, for those who gamble, Judaism **gives good odds**. That's right – **Judaism is... a good bet**.

I'll explain that **wager** in a moment – but Judaism is **MORE than that**, of course. For those who believe, or who buy in – and **most of the time, I'm all in** – Judaism is an **incredibly redemptive, meaningful** way of life. But if you **ever doubt** – you're in **GREAT company**: Abraham, Moses, King David, Prophets like Samuel, Isaiah, Jonah, Rabbis like Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides – all doubted at some point. So today, I offer a **model of faith for the modern skeptic**: I think it's a great model – because it's the **only non-extremist model** that could fit on one of those **oval-shaped car stickers**. It's just **TWO WORDS. FOUR LETTERS**, Hebrew or English. Here's the model: **SIGN: AS IF... K'ILU**

“AS IF.” “K'ilu.” Not **“as if”** like from the movie *Clueless*, or *Wayne's World*. [**Say it like the movie – “As If.. K'ilu”**] That “as if” means NO WAY. The **“as if”** I'm offering to you today is **much more hopeful** than this. It is **aspirational** Judaism – we govern ourselves and our actions and our choices, **AS IF** the most pious, **believing, faithful dogma** and promised outcomes are **real** – **even if** we **don't believe** or we **don't know** whether that's true. Let's look at a couple of **examples**, to see how it works....

Several times a year, I have someone approach me and start in, “Rabbi, you're going to **think I'm crazy, but...**” – and continue with a story about how their **mother, recently deceased, loved butterflies**, and just at the end of shiva, the mourner was crying, and a **butterfly** landed on her shoulder... how a **baby, named for his deceased grandfather**, looked over his mother's shoulder as she held him, and smiled and pointed and babbled... “Rabbi, **did my infant see my father?**”... Or while chanting the Memorial Prayer at the graveside burial of a well-known **veterinarian**, who had treated the entire community's pets – a **stray dog** came out of the brush at the edge of the cemetery, sniffed around close to the gathering at the grave, and walked through the two rows of comforters gathered for the family. **True story...**

Is there an afterlife, rabbi? Was that my father or mother? **Am I crazy?** And here is my answer: **WHY NOT believe it?** Why not **act AS IF it is true?** **I cannot KNOW...** but worse comes to worst, it's a **good bet**: **Either it's true** – and isn't that **amazing and reassuring**... or it's **not true**, but nonetheless you **derived incredible comfort** from taking a moment to appreciate the memory of your loved one. **Act AS IF** there is a **reward** in some next world for our **mitzvot** in this world! If you act **as if** there is a reward and do the **mitzvot**, **either** you will have **earned that reward**... or **if there's nothing** that comes after we bury that loved one, they will have **lived a life of goodness**, and maybe **inspired US** to live a life of **goodness**... **sustaining** their goodness in **THIS** world, after they are gone.

In this season of Judgment, **Maimonides** teaches that we should **imagine** our **mitzvot** and our **sins** on two sides of an **evenly-balanced scale** – that the **next act** will tip our scale, one way or the next. That's what we say in our prayers – that **teshuvah** (atonement), **tefillah** (prayer and self-assessment), and **tzedakah** (acts of goodness) will defer a negative verdict. **Do we really believe that?!** Does our **observation of our world** support such a vending-machine-style calculus – enough **mitzvot**, we get a good outcome... if not, not... Again, there are **plenty of reasons, plenty of tragedy** in this world to make us skeptical of this model...

But **wouldn't** the world be **better, more redemptive**, if everyone acted (**say it with me**) **AS IF** our **next action** could bring about a more **redemptive, even Messianic, Age?** That's what motivates Chabad to get us to put on tefillin or shake a lulav. Wouldn't our world be better if we acted (**say it**) **AS IF** we believed that we **mattered**, that our **actions mean something**...

... **AS IF** there is a **God** or **External Source of Goodness**, some **divine Moral Compass**, watching us – **not** to make us **uncomfortable**, but to make us our **best selves?** How many of you see that notice on **Waze** – “Police in 0.4 miles” – and check your speedometer? It **works** – **even if** the warning is old and you click “not there” as you pass... you pass **at the speed limit!** Wouldn't such a **moral check-in** make us better, if we **lived.. (point)**

AS IF?... Not because I believe that **lightning** is going to **strike me down** if I eat that bacon-double-cheeseburger-washed-down-with-a-crab-flavored-milkshake... but because I want to **believe AS IF there is a God who cares** enough about me to **root for me** to do more – so I live (*point*) *As if* God were **rooting for us** to be our best, **watching us**, yes – but also **watching OVER us**, **caring, intensely**, for each of us?...

I didn't fully make this up - It's a more **positive application** of what has been known as **Pascal's Wager** – the philosopher Blaise Pascal said that religion is a **good bet** – because (according to Pascal's theology) if God *does* exist and you act as such, you gain infinite reward. If God doesn't, you're only out a few luxuries and pleasures that your religious wager forbid you to do. In my “as if” model, I'd argue, you're not out even that – because the lifestyle you choose in living *as if* is in and of itself **redemptive**, *even if* it does not bring about ultimate, capital-R **Redemption**. That's why it's a **great bet** to live (*say it/point*) **AS IF...**

... **AS IF** that **prayer for healing** was the one that would make someone better.... **Worse comes to worst**, we paused a moment to recognize that, despite incredible advances in vaccines and other medical technology, we are **not in control**, and this is **not our fault** – that the **world is bigger** and **more mysterious** than that? If the worst occurs – and the person does *not* get better – were we not **bolstered**, or **comforted**, along the way – by that act of prayer, **AS IF we believed** it was sure to work?

Do I believe in the **factual truth** of every story in the **Torah**? No – I believe that many of them are **created to teach us timeless lessons**, to challenge us... But I believe that **there IS truth** IN them, *even* as allegories.... And so I **take them seriously** (*point, say it*) **AS IF** they are true.... So that I am **pushed** to pursue that truth, to seek it out – and in the process, *even if* they are complete hooey – they **inspire** me, **challenge** me – and **make me better**.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua **Heschel** once wrote, “A Jew is asked to take a **leap of action** rather than a **leap of thought** [faith]. He is asked to **surpass his needs**, to **do more** than he **understands** so that he can **understand more** than he **does**.... Through the ecstasy of deeds he learns to be certain of the **hereness** of God...” Heschel is saying, I think, that *even if* we're **not sure** of the **outcome** or the **benefit** – *even if* we **cannot prove**, do **not believe**, do **not even understand** – there is **benefit**, it's a **good bet** – to take the **leap of action**. There is a **good outcome** in the process, *even if* the **underlying belief** or **premise** turns out **not** to be **true**. There is an **even better outcome** if it turns out to be **true**, and we **acted, AS IF**, it were.

In today's world, I would be **lying** to you – I'd be some **snake-oil salesman** – if I presented myself as a **man of blind faith**. It works in some communities, it *may* make you **feel better** to think that **I have**, or **Judaism** has, **all the answers**, “do enough mitzvot and it'll all make sense, it'll all work out.” But **our experience** in life, *especially* over the past year and a half, does **not really support** our being so certain of outcomes.

I've told some of you before: I was a **nerd** back when I was younger (*so long ago, a nerd, look how far I've come*...) – and so my **yearbook quote** one year was, “If you're **that certain**, you're **probably wrong**.” As a **Jew**, as your **Rabbi**, I have **faith** (*it's kinda my business*)... but “**faith**” does **not** mean **certainty**. Faith is **ASPIRATIONAL**. The whole point of faith is that we are **NOT assured** of an outcome. When we live “**AS IF**,” what we are doing is **CREATING the REALITY** we **wish** it to be. **Living AS IF** our lives have **meaning**, and **purpose**, and **consequence**. That we **CAN** affect our reality. That we **matter**. It's a **self-fulfilling prophecy** – because by **acting AS IF** we **matter** – we **start to influence** our world, we **imagine a better world**, we **push ourselves** and **others toward** that better world.

In a **world** that feels like it's **spinning out of control**, like there is **no truth** or **faith** or **reassurance** – **living AS IF** *may be* our **best bet**.

Will it work? I don't know. I certainly **can't prove it** beforehand, at the outset. There are **no guarantees** that the articles of faith I propose you **hedge your bets** on will actually end up being true. **No guarantees** – *except* this one: You will be **happier**, more **fulfilled**, living **AS IF** it's all true. **As if it's true** – *no matter* how **crazy** those **beliefs** or **experiences** or **butterflies visiting** or **canine condolences** or **healing prayers** or **mitzvot** seem.

Yes: Judaism has all those **crazy rituals** and **beliefs** that we shouted out. But **crazy goes both ways**. That Manhattan School of **Music student**, practicing her **oboe**, peering into the Seminary synagogue and seeing our crazy rituals: She's **closer than most**, but *still*, even at that level, *like as not* – she won't go pro. She almost certainly will never play for the philharmonic, or make it to Carnegie Hall. But you know what they say, how to get to Carnegie Hall? *Say it with me: Practice, practice, practice... Despite the slim odds... NOT because you EXPECT to make it (it's sweeter if you DON'T expect it!) – but because, in and of itself, that practice has benefits.... So practice AS IF you're going to make it to Carnegie Hall*

I once met with a **parent** who told me about how **Hebrew School** conflicted with **hockey**, so we wouldn't see them for the next six months. I looked, and the kid was **closer in size** to the **puck**, I imagined that kid in the NHL... At first, I heard myself about to say one of those **snooty, old-school Jewish-guilt** things: **[TONE]** "In fifteen years, what's more likely – that you'll **still be Jewish**, or that you'll **still be playing** high-level **hockey**? In forty years, you may fall out of shape, but your **bris has no expiration date...**"

But *though* all that **Jewish snootiness** may be true, *instead*, I **stopped myself**, and took a different approach: I want you to **commit Jewishly**, sure – but as for the **sports** you are now so devoted to playing? **Good for you, kid – play AS IF you're going pro**. It **shifts the calculus** of success; it forces us to ask: **What will I gain, even if I DON'T go pro**, even if I don't even get recruited to play in college... but **how will I benefit** if, *right now*, I **play AS IF** a scout is going to discover me, today, in this very game, at this high-school practice? I'll earn a sense of **belonging... of fitness... of confidence... of hard work, of being valued** by peers... and some of those **skills** may **spill over** into my **school work, my friendships, my future**.

If we can do that – if we can **operate "as if"** for the miniscule odds of making it in sports or Hollywood or Broadway or anywhere else – why don't we do that for our **Judaism**? The odds – and the **up-side potential benefits** – are **WAY bigger**. A **place in the World to Come**? Bringing about a **better, more redemptive, more loving, messianic era**? **MASSIVE upside!** And again, for all you **skeptics** out there – *myself included*, sometimes – here's the thing: You **don't have to prove** the upside, you **don't have to believe** it... because worse comes to worst, the **consolation prize ain't bad**: The **WORST thing** that could happen is that you are a **better, more fulfilled person... others will benefit as well** – by your living (*say it*) **AS IF** you were heralding in a messianic age and earning an eternal reward.

This Rosh Hashanah, I pray: May we **live AS IF our next choice will tip the scales**, for us and for the world, to a **more redemptive** time... May we **live AS IF our prayers and our goodness will most certainly build the world** we seek to live in and the world we seek to **give to our children...** May we **live AS IF we matter – because we do** – and may we **live AS IF God cares** – because **God does**. May we live (*say it with me one more time*) **AS IF**. *As if* we are working to **assure** for us, for our **loved ones**, for us **all** – a *Shanah... tovah*.

