

“The Presence of Faith Does Not Mean the Absence of Doubt”

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Just over a month ago, at the luncheon following Ezra’s wonderful bar mitzvah here at Har Shalom, I ran into my second cousin who came in from New Jersey to celebrate with us. This cousin, when she approached me, had tears welling-up in her eyes, which I had interpreted as tears of joy. Ezra did such a wonderful job afterall, I thought surely she was kvelling from his davvening, his Torah reading, his beautiful d’var Torah. Not only that, the family on my father’s side is quite small, especially when you factor out all the people who don’t talk to each other, so I assumed she was just so happy to be together for a rare simcha on this side of the family. And of all offspring of my great grandfather Nathan Raskin, who came to this country in 1911, escaping Russian pogroms, who settled up the road in Hagerstown where he lived for 36 years, and then Baltimore...Ezra, his great great grandson is his only descendant able to perpetuate the Raskin name into the next generation. And the fact that Ezra is such a little mensch is a tribute to that legacy, so that’s pretty momentous, pretty emotional...certainly makes me more than a little farklempt.

Turns out that none of that was the source of my cousin Franny’s tears. She told me instead that her older sister Sandie had just begun hospice care. “Hospice,” I said, “how is that possible?!” I just saw Sandie this summer in Israel. Three years ago Sandie was diagnosed with Ovarian Cancer. I knew there had been both recurrences and times when the cancer seemed to be gone. During the time I was studying in Israel, Sandie and her husband brought their entire family...three adult children, two sons-in-law, a daughter-in-law, and two grandchildren on their synagogue’s trip to Israel. Now this side of the family lives in California, so I rarely have the opportunity to see them. It took us all being in Jerusalem at the same time to make this happen. So one night I met them at the Dan Panorama Hotel and we all had a wonderful dinner together. Sandie was beaming as all eleven of us sat around the table reconnecting, and listening to her grandchildren tell me all about their favorite parts of Israel. You know, an Israel trip is not exactly a leisurely vacation...it’s active, each day is filled to the brim, heading from one place to another to see as much as you can of the country in ten jam-packed days. Not only that, but there are mountain fortresses, ancient stone streets, hills to scale, narrow alleyways to navigate, seas to float on, and all in the heat of July! I assumed that my cousin Sandie was in full remission and keeping pace with the trip. I later found out that she spent considerable time in her hotel room, sitting out some of the tours, and meeting up with the rest of the family at the end of the day for dinner. Seeing her in Israel though, it never occurred to me that she was the least bit hindered or held back.

Last week, I messaged my cousin Sandie and her daughter Megan to tell them how much I was thinking about them over Rosh Hashana, and praying for Sandie to be comfortable and at peace.

I also admitted to not realizing how sick she was when we saw each other just a few months ago in Israel. I received this message back from Sandie's daughter Megan:

My mom's chemo had stopped working in May, and during the trip to Israel we were in a blissful period when the drugs were all out of her body but the cancer hadn't yet raged fully. When we got home she had several doctor's appointments that we thought would be promising for a new course of treatment, but each appointment yielded zero or unideal options. So it's not as though you could have known how sick she was in Israel - none of us necessarily knew that we'd be at this point just a few months later. The trip was truly the trip of a lifetime for all of us, but particularly for her. To be in Israel with her WHOLE family - what a gift and blessing.

We exchanged more messages, and in a particularly poignant one my cousin acknowledged how deeply uncomfortable she was with the High Holiday prayer *Unetaneh Tokef*, that searing meditation during musaf that contains the words: *mi'yichiyeh u'mi yamut...* who shall live and who shall die in the coming year. *Mi ve'kitzo u'mi lo ve'kitzo...* who will live a long life, and whose life will come to an untimely end. My cousin Sandie is 66 years old, and nowadays that is considered too young to be contemplating your mortality. *B'Rosh Hashanah yikateivun...* on Rosh Hashanah it is written; *u'vayom tzom Kippur yeichateimun...* and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. What is the "it" that is written and sealed? None other than our destiny. Our future. Our judgment. Sandie's daughter Megan wrote to me:

Since her original diagnosis, the High Holy Days have provided even deeper introspection for my mom, and this year, knowing it is likely her last, she has been especially troubled by the ideas of the Book of Life and who is worthy or unworthy.

I also find this to be a haunting passage. But not because I believe that God decides whose cancer is going to come raging back, and who will stay in remission; who is going to get into a clinical trial, and who will not; whose chemo or radiation will eradicate the tumor, and whose will fail to; or whose death will be agonizing and painful, and whose will be comfortable and peaceful. I don't; *I can't* believe in a God who is occupied with such grotesque decisions. That God would be capricious, arbitrary, and cruel. That God doesn't correspond to the God we read about in this mahzor, the *El rachum ve'chanun*, the God of mercy and compassion; the *Melech chafeitz ba'chayim*, the King who delights in life, the *Tzaddik be'chol ma'asav*, the One who is just in every way; the *Oseh Ha'shalom*, the great Maker of peace. No, *Unetaneh Tokef* is a meditation on the fragility and unpredictable nature of life, and therefore the urgency of repentance. But not about God as the Grim Reaper.

And yet, I am deeply, painfully perplexed about the very existence of suffering in the world; About why this world that God created has pathogens, and viruses, and germs that cause disease and suffering. There have been many clever and some not so clever explanations to suffering proffered over the ages. There's a whole field of religious thought called theodicy: the vindication of belief in God in the face of suffering. Some say that a cosmically powerful and all-knowing God has a plan that we as limited and finite humans can't fully grasp. Some posit

reward in the afterlife for those who suffer, or who die untimely deaths in this one. Others suggest that disease, suffering, and misfortune are the price we pay for free-will and a world that God has relinquished day-to-day control over in order for us to be truly autonomous. Still others, on the fringe of Jewish Orthodoxy associate suffering with divine punishment, in other words, sin begets suffering. If these explanations give you peace, I certainly don't want to take that away from you. As the modern Jewish philosopher Rabbi Norman Lamm says, "There is no mitzvah to agonize over theological problems."¹ But I do want to publicly admit that while I accept parts of these explanations, none of them, nor even the sum total of their parts fully satisfy me. I remain plagued by what the great Protestant theologian Paul Tillich called "spiritual anxiety."² I just don't have an adequate answer to the ultimate question of suffering.

The Talmud contains a brazenly honest vignette about the words of the Amidah that we are all familiar with, especially on Yom Kippur when we say it six times! The words are: *Ha'El, ha'Gadol ha'Gibbor ve'Ha'Norah*...In each and every Amidah we begin by reciting, "God, the great, the mighty, and the awe-inspiring." This is actually a direct quote from the greatest prophet of all Moses. Says the Talmud in Tractate Yoma 69b, the prophet Jeremiah witnessed with his own eyes the Babylonian destruction of the first Temple. Utterly traumatized by this he said, Where are God's awe-inspiring deeds? Pagans are burning and destroying the Temple!, I just can't say *ha'nora*, I can't call God awe-inspiring when I am witnessing this abomination! So apparently the prophet Jeremiah, when reciting his Amidah said *Ha'El Ha'Gadol, Ha'Gibbor*, but omitted *Ha'Norah*. Later, Daniel witnessed the Greek desecration of the Temple and said...*Gibbor*? I'm supposed to call God mighty when these Greeks are erecting statues of their gods in the Holy of Holies and plundering the Temple? Where is God's might? So the same Daniel who survived being thrown in a lion's den, who has an entire book of the Bible named for him, said in his Amidah *Ha'El Ha'Gadol ve'Ha'Norah* but not *Ha'Gibbor*.

What I think is so fascinating about this text is that it acknowledges that questions of faith, struggles with how to make sense of belief in God when we witness tragedy is not some new, liberal, modern kind of doubt. Questions of faith have existed for as long as religion has existed. And the fact that the Talmud canonizes a tale about prophets, people of great repute wrestling with ideas about God, even to the extent that they eliminate parts of classical prayers that they can't bring themselves to honestly say is utterly fascinating and for me also liberating.

The Bible itself reflects this struggle over and over again, and perhaps nowhere in as raw and explicit terms as the Book of Psalms. In the words of the 22nd Psalm, the Psalmist roars: *Eli Eli, lama azavtani?* My God, My God why have you forsaken me? *Rachok mishuati, divrei sha'agati*, Why is your salvation so far away, why are you so distant from my calls of distress? *Elohai ekra yomam*, God I call out to you every single day, *v'lo ta'aneh*, but You don't answer me. Our companion text for this season is actually Psalm 27, which is traditionally recited daily from the beginning of Elul to the end of Sukkot. There the Psalmist says: *Al tasteir paneicha*

¹ Lamm, Norman. "Faith and Doubt." *Tradition* 9 (1967), pp. 14-51

² *Ibid.*

mi'meini, Please God, stop hiding from me! *Al titsheini ve'al ta'azveini*, do not forsake me, do not abandon me! Who would write those words if they weren't feeling forsaken or abandoned?! I so revere the honesty of that text, because we have all felt that sense of alienation! Maybe it's been while lying sick in a bed, wondering when the pain will ever end. Maybe it's been while facing another round of chemo or another IVF treatment wondering if you have the stamina to go through it one more time. Maybe you've struggled to raise a challenging kid or to support aging parents, and repeatedly called out to God to give you stamina. Maybe you lost a partner and you have cried out in the middle of the night because you feel so lonely and heartbroken. I really believe that questions, doubts, fears, and sometimes just not feeling that God is there at all are very much a part of being human, even when you are a *religious* human! *The presence of faith does not mean the absence of doubt.*³ I am very skeptical of people who claim to have perfect faith. Who say they never question God. Who look at the world as it is and never have any qualms or struggles with their faith. I am much more drawn to people like the Psalmist or Abraham or Job who have the chutzpah to say, What are you doing God?! This doesn't make sense! Or I need you and I can't seem to find you!

So you may be wondering, how are you a religious Jew? Why do you believe in God? Why do you pray or observe mitzvot? I owe so much of my spiritual sanity when it comes to issues of suffering to my beloved Seminary professor Rabbi Neil Gillman, of blessed memory. In his 2013 book entitled *Believing and Its Tensions*,⁴ he wrote: I do not believe that there is an adequate theological answer to suffering. All the answers that are basically rooted in theology have not worked...but then he says...I feel wonderful that religion is much more than theology...In the case of Judaism [that] includes two extraordinarily powerful resources: community and...rituals..."

And when you stop and think about it, it is rarely religious dogmas or creeds that brings people comfort in times of crisis. In fact, speculating on God's role in someone's critical illness or death could actually inflict more pain than comfort. Rather, in my experience, it is the presence of community, the specific, sacred guideposts that Judaism provides as direction for supporting people who are suffering that make the greatest difference. As Professor Gillman wrote:

Rituals...are ways of coping with chaos. Rituals are ordering devices; what they accomplish is to provide specific moments, specific performances, and specific spaces for us to deal with the incipient anarchy that assails us at critical moments in our life experience. We say specific words, we enter specific spaces, we observe specific moments, and we perform specific activities....this is where the coping mechanism begins.

I am so grateful to be a part of an ancient religious community that has developed such a compassionate, sensitive, wise repertoire for providing and receiving comfort. And to tell you

³ I have seen this quote in various places, but have not been able to corroborate the source.

⁴ Gillman, Neil. *Believing and Its Tensions*, A Personal Conversation about God, Torah, Suffering, and Death in Jewish Thought. Jewish Lights, 2013

the truth, it is in those moments when I witness the outpouring of love from community, and the immersion in Judaism's sacred rituals that I feel God's presence most palpably. I can hardly think of anything holier than the person who offers to drive someone to a doctor's appointment because they can't get there themselves. There is an indescribable holiness when people gather around a hospital bed to visit and uplift another who is ill. Or the person who provides care and comfort to people nearing the end of their lives in hospice. Or the person who reaches out to a mourner after shiva has ended and family and friends have dispersed to check on how they are holding up. I remember the story of a congregant whose wife passed away who told me that all of his non-Jewish friends prayed for him and all of his Jewish friends cooked for him. Prayer is wonderful, but feeding is pretty holy too. And then there are the people, all of them volunteers, who respond to the call when someone dies. Who each arrive at the funeral home after dark, to gently, carefully, and with the utmost dignity, wash and dress the dead in preparation for burial. These are not people with funeral director's licenses or trained medical professionals. They are people in this congregation who provide this service to other members, giving grieving families the comfort of knowing that their loved one is not alone, not being poked or prodded, but being given the blessing of the most reverential treatment prior to burial. Having been a rabbi for 17 years now, I can go on and on with stories like these. But I can assure you that these are the moments when I feel God's presence the most; these are the times when the tingle of otherworldly presence surrounds me; these times when people activate the power of community and ritual that channel God's presence so palpably.

I had that same sensation when I received a recent message from my cousin Sandie. She wrote:

Megan is usually here most days for lunch and [to take] a nap with me (favorite part of the day!) I am so tired all the time from so much morphine, but no pain! The kids are going to put up the sukkah for me. Last year I did big lunches and dinners. This year it will just be tea... I'm...sleeping a lot (from the morphine), and no longer leaving the house much. I am very much at peace.

I so cherish that image of a daughter coming in the middle of the day, slipping between the sheets and wrapping her arms around her mother as they drift off together for a nap. I am grateful that her sukkah will be built for her, so that she can sit in its shade and drink tea with her family. I know God's presence will dwell with her in that sukkah.

Returning to that Talmudic episode where Jeremiah and Daniel omit references to God they can't bring themselves to say with sincerity, the story concludes with the *Anshei K'nesset Ha'Gedolah*, an august body of prophets and sages credited with determining the canon of the Hebrew Bible, and putting final form to various prayers and blessings that we know and love today. Aware of the qualms of Jeremiah and Daniel, they nevertheless put the full form of the Amidah, *Ha'El, ha'Gadol ha'Gibbor ve'Ha'Norah*... "God, the great, the mighty, and the awe-inspiring." In doing so, they re-established Moses's original words, and encouraged the Jewish people to find different ways of witnessing God's greatness, might, and awe. I see God as

Ha'Gadol, or great in all the astute rituals and sensitive guidance our tradition provides for offering comfort and care to those in need. I see God as *Ha'Gibbor*, or mighty, when I witness the courage and grace that people like my cousin Sandie possess when facing illness and uncertainty; When they know they are not alone and will face whatever comes with the support of a dedicated community. And I sense God as *Ha'Nora* so very awesome, when I discover again and again the tremendous capacity of ordinary people to offer compassion, love, and selfless care for others.

As much as I continue to have “spiritual anxiety” about the causes and reasons for suffering in the world, I also give thanks to *Ha'El Ha'Gadol Ha'Gibbor, ve'Ha'Nora* a great, mighty, and awesome God for creating people with some of those very same traits.

Let us turn together now to the Yizkor service, as we acknowledge another of God's great, mighty, and awesome blessings...the blessing of memory.