

An Open Letter to Suzannah: Why I'm a Person of Faith in the 21st Century

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With my daughter's permission, I share an open letter to her:

Dear Suzannah,

A few months ago, we sat in this sanctuary and celebrated your becoming bat mitzvah with our community, and our family and friends from across the country. For all these years that I've been a rabbi, I've told families that there are two truths about the b'nai mitzvah experience. The first is that the moment when a young person is called to Torah is eternal. By taking their place in our chain of tradition, each b'nai mitzvah student transforms the Jewish people forever. *Your* presence changed who we are as a people, sweetie. Amazing. *My* kid. The second truth is that the service goes by in a nanosecond, and parents better close their eyes at some point to take a mental picture, because if they don't, it'll all be a blur. I took my own advice, I closed my eyes, I tried to take it all in, and, in truth, it was still a blur.

That was at the heart of the whole weekend for me. Every moment felt permanent and fleeting. Eternal and transient. And, the older I get, the more that feels like the truth of every day, of every breath I take. We inhale and we are part of all that ever was and all that ever will be. We exhale and we let it all go.

I inhale, and you were born, green eyed and helpless.

I exhale, and you're a woman out in the world, poised and intelligent.

I watch you, and I see that the rite of passage of bat mitzvah comes at the exact right moment. I look at you, Peanut, a capable, self-possessed, mature young adult and I can envision the independent life that you're going to lead in just a few years. Thinking about this, my heart expands with emotion—pride, worry, always worry, and more love than I can put into words.

I worry that we're living in a world where the old structures and institutions that we once could depend on are breaking down. I don't know what the world of your adulthood will look like. It seems that, in every age, humanity leaps forward and tumbles backward in equal measure. In every generation, the miracle of human ingenuity and the cravenness of human cruelty are pushed beyond the bounds of our imagination. It's hard to see how things could get any worse. Or any better. But they always do.

I'm writing on a moody Seattle morning where the sky is set off against the evergreens in textured layers of gray and white. Just when I think it's about to rain the sun bursts through and saturates everything with a bright and warm light. It occurs to me that this is what life is like. Even as storm clouds loom, light always breaks through, and I see just how beautiful and transitory everything around me is. My heart swells with gratitude that I'm here to witness it. Eternity and

transience, right here in our own backyard. As the sunlight shimmers and Mordy jumps from my feet to bark at another dog passing by.

Perhaps this description is cringey (as you might say) but this is how I move through the world. I try to make meaning out of what I experience, and, I try to find that which gives me hope. That's what I think it means to be a person of faith. Always on alert for meaning and hope.

And that's the crux of the matter, Peanut. That's why I'm writing today. On Yom Kippur, we contemplate what's most important in our lives. And so, I want to talk to you about being a person of faith in the 21st century, when technology is advancing so quickly, and old norms make no sense anymore, and organized religion seems like an antiquated institution.

People say to me all the time, "I'm an atheist, rabbi. Really, what other choice do we have but to trust in science?" And, of course, I believe in science, too. I'm indebted to those who spend their lives hypothesizing and testing and bringing irrefutable facts to the rest of us. Being a person of faith doesn't mean that you deny the truth of science; in fact, to my mind, it means reveling in scientific discoveries. It means taking these discoveries and deriving meaning from them, never losing a sense of awe at the magnificence of the universe. I'm with Albert Einstein who said that "Religion without science is blind." But he also said, that "science without religion is lame."¹

I believe the whole "science versus religion" debate is a false dichotomy. It's a setup, designed because we have dualistic minds that like to categorize and identify and make order out of the dizzying array of stimuli coming at us all the time. The ultimate truth about existence isn't discovered through *either* science *or* faith. It isn't even discovered through *both* science *and* faith. The ultimate truth of our existence is so much more complex than our limited human consciousness could ever embrace.

That's where spirituality comes into play, Peanut. People also say to me, "Well, rabbi, I'm spiritual, not religious." Sweets, you know that Nana and Poppy instilled a love of Jewish identity in me but that I wasn't raised in a religiously observant home. I started studying Judaism because I, too, was spiritual and not religious, and, frankly, I was tired of feeling like a stranger in the sanctuary when I came on the High Holy Days. I understand how alienating the rituals and laws and myths of organized religion can be.

What I think people mean when they tell me that they're spiritual is they recognize moments when they forget themselves but feel a full awareness of all that is around them; and this awareness leads to a profound connection with others, with the world, with the universe. Last year, at many house gatherings, I asked folks from Beth Am, when do you feel spiritual? It's wonderful how many people responded, igniting the most interesting conversations. Some people gave answers connected to Judaism—learning to chant Torah, or making matzoh ball soup with a grandchild, or hearing the long shofar blast at the end of Yom Kippur. But for others it was when they went to yoga. Or during meditation. Being on a bike ride when the wildflowers are in bloom. Laughing with friends, as the candles flicker down after dinner. Gazing at the ocean. Listening to Bach or maybe Lizzo or

¹ <https://www.sacred-texts.com/aor/einstein/einsci.htm#TOP>

Louis Armstrong. Climbing Mt. Rainier. Reading a novel you can't put down. Embracing someone you love, savoring their nearness.

These moments stay with us, changing us, even as they fade as quickly as they arrive. Each moment, lasting and fleeting, eternal and transient. *This* is the sweet heartache of being human. This is what renders our lives meaningful. To be a person of faith is to give a name to these experiences. We call these moments *sacred*. They allow us to touch the infinite within our finite lives. And because language is so limiting; because the weight of Western civilization is so heavy; we give a name to the source for this experience of the sacred. We call it God.

Let's pause here with God for a moment. Whatever it is you think I mean when I say the word "God", whatever definition or concept you think I'm trying to convey; I must tell you, you're probably wrong. If only because the word God is a place-holder, a label to put on an experience. You know a lot of rabbis, sweetheart, and every one of them will say that "Do you believe in God?" is not the right question. Do you believe in love? In pain? In doubt? It doesn't really matter what you believe about any of those experiences, does it? I've seen you feel love and pain and doubt, and I know when those experiences sweep through you, no matter what you might think about them, they change the course of your whole day.

This is why it's incredibly frustrating to talk about God, the experience goes beyond our rational minds, beyond where language can lead us. You know when we go to visit Poppy in Florida, and we wind up at the beach, and you and Daddy drop your stuff and run into the ocean? And sometimes, after you've reassured me 1000 times that the water isn't too cold, I join you? I love diving into the waves with both of you, being swept up in the ebb and flow to and from the shore. You may have noticed that there's always a moment when I swim away from both of you. I can't help myself. When I'm in the ocean, at some point I must turn from the beach and towards the vastness before me. I tread water with just my nose and eyes above the surface and as far as I can see is the deep blue expanse of water, then the horizon line, then the lighter expanse of blue sky. And because my ears are underwater, all I hear is my own breathing, in and out, in and out. At that moment, I feel a oneness. A unity. A sense of being *b'yachad* with everything. Eternal. And transient.

The image of God as the ocean and we as the waves is cliché, but it really works for me, Peanut. One modern Jewish theologian has put it this way:

This may be the best available metaphor...Each wave has its moment when it's identifiable as somewhat distinct from the ocean. Nevertheless, no wave is entirely separate either. Because the waves [rise out] of the ocean, our knowledge of the ocean is largely dependent on the waves we see. ²

Similarly, it seems to me, that each person thinks that we're a unique individual roaming through the world, when, in truth, we're simply given this embodied form for a short while before we return to the oceanic oneness from which we came.

² Adapted from:

<https://www.newenglishreview.org/Richard L. Rubenstein/God after the Death of God/>

Sweetheart, I believe one of the reasons why Judaism has lasted for over three millennia is because somehow our ancestors awakened to this insight and decided to use a four letter name for the source of all existence, *yud, heb, vav, heb*. What we call Adonai, or Hashem, or Makom, or Holy One of Blessing, or Eternal, or any one of the other seventy-two names that Jews have for God. We have so many names precisely because God can't be captured in words. But these four letters, *yud, heb, vav, heb*, are connected to the Hebrew word "to be", "to exist", they encompass all that was, all that is and all that ever will be. "God is the name we give the oneness of it all."³ As one of our greatest sages, the Ba'al Shem Tov, teaches, "When we say the Shema, and we say *Adonai* is One, we mean that nothing other than God exists in the universe." All that is, is God.

Do you need to be religious to have an awareness of this Oneness, this unity of which we are all a part? Absolutely not. And yet, for me, the rituals and texts and values of Judaism help give structure to my experience of the Oneness out of which I arise. I can't quite wrap my mind around the mystery of why I've been born or why I will die, but Judaism does help me discover the purpose for the days in between.

There's a beautiful teaching that the Hebrew word *mitzvah* is related to the Aramaic word *tzavta*, which means "a connection". Through the *mitzvot*, the ritual and ethical acts of Judaism, I am connected to something bigger than myself, drawing me nearer to the source of all being. And when that's not enough to inspire me, I just think about how the *mitzvot* have been handed down generation to generation to generation to generation. Everything that we do as Jews, we follow in the footsteps of those who came before us—from lighting candles on Shabbat; to tasting the bitter herb at Pesach; to being kind to the poor, the vulnerable and the stranger in our midst.

What then, you may ask, do I make of the Torah? I think people miss the point when they try to interpret Torah literally. Torah speaks truth about reality but does not reveal facts—it begs to be interpreted. It's an "invitation into a conversation"⁴, not an instruction manual for living. And, sweets, if you approach Torah with an open heart you may be surprised by what you glean. "Not always, but often enough, the text will touch you," challenge you, impart wisdom by raising more questions than it answers. As one teacher says, when you encounter Torah, "Be prepared for spiritual journeys...Important things happen to those who cross rivers to possibility. Home is generally to be discovered only in the leaving of it."⁵

That brings us back to why I'm writing today. The bat mitzvah awakened in me that in a few short years you'll be leaving our home to discover your own place in the world. I share all of this not to tell you what to do, but to show you one path for moving through life, the path of faith. I hope you, too, will find that Judaism can help navigate a confused and confusing world, bringing you meaning and hope even on the darkest day.

And so we are here together on Yom Kippur. If you'll only listen for it, I know the call of Kol Nidre—those haunting notes that fall and rise and fall again—will beckon to you, reminding you that you can always return to the deepest part of yourself. The prayers of this season remind us

³ Daniel Matt, *God and the Big Bang: Discovering Harmony between Science and Spirituality* (Jewish Lights, 1998), p. 36

⁴ Sarah Hurwitz, *Here All Along*, (Spiegel and Grau, 2019)

⁵ Arnold Eisen, *Taking Hold of Torah: Jewish Commitment and Community in America*, (Indiana University Press, 2000), p.22-23.

that the wisdom of our tradition is enduring, even as our time on this earth is temporary. What will we do while we're here? Will we share the gifts that we, and only we, possess?

Breathe in, sweetheart, and rise up to your full strength. Breathe out and share your gifts with the world.

And in every moment, with every breath, know that my love for you flows from the Source of all being.

We inhale and we're part of all that ever was and ever will be.

We exhale and we let it all go.

We rise and return, like a wave on the ocean.

And all that is, is God.