

The God I believe In

My teacher, colleague and friend, Rabbi Harold Kushner, who died earlier this year, Zichrono Livracha, May his memory be for a blessing, wrote a very successful book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. The motivation to write this book arose from a situation in his own family. His first born child, Aaron, whom I had met when I was picking up my son Sam at the Solomon Schechter School in Newton many years ago, was born with progeria, a genetic disease which results in accelerated aging. At the age of ten, Aaron looked like a miniature old man. He was about three feet tall, he had no hair and his face was rather wrinkled. Rabbi Kushner writes that when he was informed that his son had progeria, he was a young inexperienced rabbi. He had grown up with the belief that God was an all-wise, all powerful parent figure who would love and treat him as his earthly parents did, or even better. He assumed that if we are obedient and deserving, God rewards us. If we get out of line, He disciplines us. In sum, Rabbi Kushner believed that God sees to it that we get what we deserve in life. And so it is understandable that when he came to realize that Aaron had an incurable genetic disease which would result in an early death, he was devastated. Not only was Aaron's condition hard on Rabbi Kushner and his wife Suzette, but what about Aaron? He surely didn't deserve to be so disfigured, having to endure

the startled looks of children and adults who gawked at him. And so when Aaron died two days after his 14th birthday, Rabbi Kushner felt compelled to write his famous book in response to his family tragedy and in an effort to honor the memory of his son. In the book he writes how he has been able to retain his faith in God, but not before changing his core beliefs about God. He surrendered his previous belief that God takes note of our everyday actions and rewards or punishes us accordingly. His new belief about God was that God has created us and is always there to encourage us and comfort us if we but reach out for His inspiring presence, but He does not intervene in our daily lives.

My life experience has been very different from Rabbi Kushner's. I have experienced nothing as tragic and difficult as his son's progeria. True, I was severely challenged by seasonal depression for twenty years, but I was blessed with the aid of psychiatry and medication, so that I recovered. Unlike Rabbi Kushner, I understood from an early age that life was not fair, that the wicked can enjoy great prosperity and the righteous can suffer from never ending tragedies. Nevertheless, I have always felt that a belief in God was essential if I was to understand the meaning of my life. And so this morning, I would like to share with you the basic principles of what I believe about God.

Many of my rabbinic colleagues are displeased with the traditional prayer book, because at times it suggests a God such as the one Rabbi Kushner had to abandon, a three “O” God, Omniscient (all knowing), Omnipotent (all Powerful) and Omnipresent (always involved in our daily lives). But there are other sections of the Siddur, which do not include the expectation that God will intervene in our daily lives to perform miracles, and it is these prayers that have helped me fashion a belief in God that is meaningful to me. The section of the prayer book which has been particularly helpful in shaping my God belief is the Sh’ma and its blessings. Although these prayers originated 2000 years ago, I find them very meaningful today.

It is clear that the main thrust of Sh’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad is that God is one. While most other ancient religions envisioned that there were a number of gods, Judaism affirmed that the laws of nature were one and that all human beings were one. On the basis of these truths, Abraham declared that there is one God and one humanity. We Jews have held fast to that truth for four thousand years, a belief that has withstood the test of time. To me its veracity is self-evident. But what more can we say about God other than God’s oneness? By inviting you to look at the three blessings surrounding the Sh’ma, I want to share with you what else I believe about God other than His oneness.

The Sh'ma is preceded by two *b'rachot* two blessings and followed by a third blessing. The **technical** definition of a *br'acha* or blessing (please note the word **technical**) is a prayer that begins with the following three words *Baruch Ata Adonai*, or concludes with *Baruch Atah Adonai*, or begins and ends with that same phrase. The three blessings surrounding the Sh'ma comprise the three pillars of my belief in God. The theme of the first blessing before the Sh'ma is God's Creation of the World; the theme of the second blessing prior to the Sh'ma deals with Revelation, God's giving of Torah to our ancestors and to us; and the theme of the third blessing which follows the Sh'ma focuses on Redemption, God's role in the attainment of a world of freedom, justice and peace.

In the morning service the first blessing before the Sh'ma is known as the *Yotzer*. It is called the Yotzer prayer because it begins with the affirmation that at Creation, God *Yotzer* formed and continues to fashion our world, our universe and all that is in it. This *b'racha* uses both of the key words that are featured in the beginning of Genesis, *yotzer* to fashion or form and *borey* to create. The introductory verse states **Yotzer Or** God "fashions light" **Uvorey choshech** and God creates darkness. The motif of light is especially prominent in this blessing. Indeed, there are **eight** words in the *Yotzer* prayer that refer to light, such as **hameyir la-aretz** God causes light to shine over

the earth and its inhabitants, and the conclusion of the blessing ***Baruch Ata Adonai Yotzer H'morot*** "We praise You O God for fashioning the great lights." The first great light is the sun which illumines and warms us by day. The second great light is the moon which along with the sun helps us set the times for the days, months and years of our lives. This emphasis on light stems from the fact that on the very first day of Creation God exclaims ***Y'hi Or*** "Let there be light!" But this is no ordinary light. In our Genesis account of creation, the sun and the moon and the stars are not created until the fourth day, so what type of light is this? Tradition says it is the messianic light of blessing which is stored up for the righteous in the world to come. I see it as the light of creativity, similar perhaps to the cartoon image of the student who has a brilliant idea expressed by an illuminated lightbulb over his or her head. I believe that God had a stupendous idea, the idea to create the universe, our galaxy, our planet earth, our sun, whose light is the source of all life on earth, and finally us, humanity.

I have always loved astronomy. As a freshman at Harvard I took a course in astronomy with Cecilia Payne Gephoshkin where I learned about the Big Bang Theory. Astronomers posit that 13 billion years ago there was a momentary explosion of energy from a single small concentration of ultra dense matter, which is sometimes called the primeval atom. This explosion

gave birth to our ever expanding universe. I like to think that that was the moment when God said **Yehi Or** “Let there be light.” The creation of the universe and its uniform patterns of gravity and light convince me that there is One power that has created this amazing universe and that same power sustains us and the universe every day as it says in the Yotzer, **Uvtuvo M’chadesh b’chol yom Tamid Ma-aseh B’reyshit** “In His goodness, (God) continuously renews the work of creation every day” The amazing new James Webb Telescope which is circling the earth helps us to discover many neverbefore seen wonders, all of which seem to reaffirm the concept of the unity of Creation and its Creator.

We don’t however have to look at the stars to comprehend God’s amazing acts of creation. Just look at a forest of trees which absorbs carbon dioxide and releases oxygen. By divine intent, this is just the opposite of we humans, who breathe in oxygen and exhale carbon dioxide. There would be no life without this simple yet amazing chemical exchange between humanity and the forests. And what about nature itself. To walk in the woods, to stand on the shores of the ocean, to look out over the world from a mountain top, impresses me with the presence of God. Abraham Joshua Heschel called this experience “radical amazement,” and that’s exactly what I feel when I open my eyes, ears and heart to the world of nature. I have also been able

to encounter the presence of God here in this beautiful sanctuary, especially since I retired and don't have to think about what's coming next in the service. There are, of course, other reflections of the divine in our lives. Take a look at the human body. There are millions of miracles going on in our bodies right now that are necessary to keep us alive. Or turn to an entirely different aspect of divine creation, the world of music. Almost every piece of music that Bach composed, he wrote at the top of the first page, "For the Glory of God." I once heard an elderly pianist say, "To me, Bach is God." It may have been an exaggeration, but I agree with her that when I listen to Bach I often feel the presence of God. Birds may tweet and whales may send out clicks, whistles and pulsating beats, but only we humans can compose, perform, and enjoy God's gift of music. And the same can be said of art. God implanted within us the ability to create beautiful paintings and sculpture which express a sense of beauty and wonder all its own. And what about language and literature, uniquely human capacities that God has give us. How blessed we are by Our Creator. The Yotzer prayer then, provides the foundation for my belief that God has created the best of all possible worlds so that we humans might live our lives in the light of God's glory.

The second b'racha before the Sh'ma is the Ahavah Rabbah "Great Love." It's theme is divine Revelation. In this prayer, we praise God for

loving us by teaching us Torah. God did not just create us and then abandon us to figure out how to be good human beings. God gave us Torah which tells us how to live our lives. It is an invaluable gift because life itself is a tremendous challenge. The Rabbis posit that human beings have two inclinations, *Yetzer Tov* the good inclination and *Yetzer Ra* the evil inclination. The good inclination urges us to love and support our family and to be kind to other human beings. The evil inclination urges us to compete with other human beings and to engage in sex. The Rabbis recognized that the *Yetzer Ra* the so called evil inclination is sometimes necessary and very good, because we need ambition to secure food and water and to build homes and communities, and we need our sexuality to procreate and give rise to our family and all future families. The *Yetzer Ra* only becomes evil when we allow lust and greed to dominate our lives. But if we cling to God's Torah, God's teachings will help us keep the *Yetzer Ra* the evil inclination in check.

I have many favorite phrases from the Ahavah Rabbah the "Great Love" b'racha. It begins with the statement, "How deeply have you loved us Adonai, our God, gracing us with surpassing compassion. On account of our forefathers and mothers whose trust led You to teach them the laws of life, be gracious to us, teaching us as well." Later in the Ahavah Rabbah we encounter the words which Sh'lomo Carlbach made famous *V'haeir Eyneynu*

B'toratecha "Enlighten our eyes in your Torah O God." The assumption that the Ahavah Rabbah makes is that in addition to the revelation from God to Moses at Mt. Sinai, God continues to teach us Torah every day. We find support for this belief in one of the most meaningful verses in the Torah that we read on Yom Kippur from the 30th chapter of Deuteronomy, "Surely, this instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond your reach. It is not in the heavens that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us that we may observe it. Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it.' No the word is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart that you may do it."

My teacher, Rabbi Chanan Brichto taught me that we know that God teaches Torah to us and to all peoples of the world because every religion, be it Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, etc, has teachings which are similar to the Ten Commandments – You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. Morality is not the private possession of Jews and Christians because God has implanted within the heart and mouths of every human being the essential morality of what we Jews call "Torah."

We can also confirm this belief from our system of justice. Normally, a jury of twelve individuals has to decide if a defendant has violated the law, but sometimes, a jury is called upon to determine if the defendant has transgressed a basic moral precept. This occurs in the category of equity law. My father was an attorney whose primary field of expertise was estate law, the writing of wills. On occasion, however, he was also asked to participate in other fields of law. One time, some tomato farmers in New Jersey came to him with a complaint against their buyer the Campbell Soup Company. They told him that they had signed a contract with Campbells some years prior, but that the contract was terribly unfair. The money that they received from the sale of their tomatoes was less than it cost to grow them. My father took the case and argued that equity law indicated that the contract was unfair since the farmers had no profit. The judge agreed with my father. He ruled that even though the law says that you should adhere to a contract, there are occasions when fairness and morality overrule the law and this was one of them. I am proud of the fact that my father's case is often part of the curriculum of law schools across the country. But, where does a judge and where does a jury derive their sense of what is fair? I contend it comes from God and it is available to every one of us, because we are blessed with the capacity to determine what is fair and what is not fair. This principle of

fairness or reasonableness is relevant to the current situation in Israel, where far right politicians are challenging the right of the Israeli Supreme Court to declare that some legislation is unreasonable. Let us hope that the Israeli Supreme Court does not lose this power as the struggle for democracy in Israel hangs in the balance.

So we know what is right and true because God has implanted the essence of Torah, our capacity to know right from wrong in our hearts and mouths. The only problem is that performing the ideals of Torah throughout our lives is very challenging. The Yetzer Ra the evil inclination, love of power, love of money and love of fame gets in the way of our love of Torah. And so we have to cling to the Torah every day, b'chol L'vavcha with all our hearts, b'chaol Nafsh'cha with all our souls uvchol M'odecha and with all our might. If we can, then we fulfill our Abrahamic role as teachers and messengers of God's loving gift of Torah in our families, in our communities and in the world.

The third blessing that follows the Sh'ma and the V'ahavta focuses on the theme of God as a Redeemer. When we Jews put our faith in God as a Redeemer it is very different than the Christian use of that term. For Christians to be redeemed is to be saved from sin. In Christianity, human beings are viewed as essentially sinful, and in need of redemption by means of their belief in the sacrificial atonement of Jesus. The Jewish view of God

as a Redeemer has to do with the power of God to help save those who are enslaved by political oppression, by poverty or by widespread disease and natural catastrophes.

The Midrash says that when God was about to create human beings, the angels argued against it, because they were convinced that humanity would do many evil things. God was aware that human beings would often mess things up, but He went ahead and created mankind anyway. Why? Because He was also aware that human beings would perform deeds of righteousness, and this divine expectation of human righteousness more than anything else convinced God to launch his human experiment. God and man working together towards righteousness can result in the redemption of the world.

The most significant redemption in the history of the Jewish people took place in Egypt 3000 years ago when we were redeemed from slavery. The Exodus which is celebrated at every Passover seder remains the primary example of the theme of Redemption in Judaism. It is not surprising then, that the MiChamocha from the Song of the Sea is the centerpiece of the blessing of divine redemption that follows the Sh'ma and V'ahavta. In that blessing we recall when our ancestors walked through the Red Sea with Pharaoh's chariots in fast pursuit. The ancient song says that at that moment,

the Israelites sang, “Mi Chamocha Ba-eilim Adonai Who is like you O God among the mighty, Who is like You, majestic in holiness awesome in splendor, working wonders.” The prayer concludes with the key words Baruch Ata Adonai ga-al Yisrael, Praised are you O God, Redeemer of Israel. The Exodus then is the Jewish paradigm par excellence that teaches us about God’s hope for us and all humanity. As God redeemed us from Egyptian slavery, God wants every human being to be free to live in peace. In the context of the modern world, we will have achieved redemption when everyone on earth is free from war, oppression, injustice that are so pervasive today. In the last fifty years, we Jews have come to call this effort Tikkun Olam the Repair of the World.

The key question is does God get directly involved in Tikkun Olam? Or is God so committed to free will, that He doesn’t dare intervene to thwart the wicked and to save the oppressed? I believe that God **is** involved in Redemption. All three pillars of my God belief, Creation, Revelation and Redemption suggest that this is so. Creation is the starting point. God has created the world so that we might live and enjoy the earth and take care of it. In creating us God gave us the intelligence and skills that we can use to make life better for all of us. However, we need God’s Revelation, God’s Torah to teach us how to use our skills for good. And finally, I believe that

God's greatest priority is to help redeem everyone on earth, by encouraging us to be kind, righteous, loving human beings. God encourages us in this direction because following every Mitzvah, every good deed that we do for others, we feel rewarded by an awareness of God's blessing coursing through our mind, heart and body. This is God's way of giving us a pat on the back.

There is a wonderful committee at Temple Beth David headed by Mark and Barbara Freidman. For a year and a half we have been involved in helping to resettle a refugee Afghan family of two parents and their two young sons. The father drove a truck for the American armed forces in Afghanistan. If he had remained in his country, the Taliban would have surely executed him. And so he fled to America with his wife and two children. We have been trying to help the family as much as possible. Among the hundreds of acts of kindness, we have helped them find an apartment, we have been able to secure free medical and dental care which they were badly in need of, we have helped the father find employment, we have helped educate both boys at Shalom Corner the preschool in our Temple, and so many other acts of loving kindness. The family has responded by trying very hard to learn English and to be as responsible as possible for their own welfare. And each member of our committee including myself feel that by helping to resettle this

refugee familys, we have made the world a little better and each of us rejoices in the sense of blessing that comes from God for our good deeds.

In the wake of the Holocaust we know that there is still a great deal of evil in the world, but at the same time we see signs of tremendous human progress – the elevation of the status of women, the election of a black President in America, the international effort to reduce poverty and sickness, the work of our scientists to develop in record time a vaccine for Covid, the advances made educating people about respect for the individual regardless of his or her gender identity, the national protests against needless warfare as was the case during the Viet Nam war, and so many more.

And so I continue to have hope for our world sustained by my belief in God as a Creator, as a Teacher of Torah and as a Redeemer who encourages us to do acts of kindness in pursuit of a better world. May we continue to make progress towards this vision in the New Year 5784 v'Imru Amen and let us say Amen.