

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
8th Day of Pesach - Yizkor
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I want to ask you all something about your parents. Do you know what your parents believe, or believed? Do you know what your parents believed, Jewishly, I mean? About God, about Torah, about mitzvot, about reward and punishment, about the world to come and the end of days, about what happens when we die? These may not be everyday topics of conversation, but still, I'm curious.

If the answer is yes, think about why and how you know these things. Perhaps your parents were people of deep, abiding faith and Jewish practice, and you know what they believe or believed because it was obvious based on what they did.

Or maybe you discussed some of these big questions, and they told you, at one time or another.

If the answer is no, if you don't really know what they believed, it may be because what they believed wasn't simple or obvious. It couldn't fit on a bumper sticker, like תורה מן השמים, "Torah from Heaven" can.

If you have children, what do or did or will they know about what you really believe? Some people believe that when we die, we're reunited with our loved ones who have also left this world. That's a belief that people sometimes mention. But what about God's role in our lives and the world? What about why we do these Jewish rituals in a particular way? Do your children really know what you believe?

They may not. And again, that might be because what you believe may not be so easy to communicate, and may be even harder to transmit--just because something is meaningful to me or you doesn't mean it will be meaningful to anyone else.

There are some beliefs that are really easy to encapsulate and transmit - that God is up in heaven, that He (and I'm using "he" intentionally) is watching and knows what you do, and will punish you if you err, and will reward you if you do well, and the Torah is God's guide to us about how to behave.

Wasn't that simple and easy? So easy to communicate, to transmit. If that's what a parent believed, or what we believed, it would be pretty easy to pass that along.

The problem is that many of us don't or can't believe with that simple faith for all kinds of reasons. With all that we know of philosophy and science and psychology and other religions, with all that we've experienced as individuals, as a people--the Holocaust, assimilation, the modern state of Israel, our beliefs, or at least my beliefs, are a lot more complicated than those of the last rabbi in my family, my great-great-grandfather, an immigrant who was a chumash teacher - a Torah teacher - in Brooklyn in the first decades of the twentieth century.

He didn't need to write essays about what he believes about God to get his position or to start or complete his learning. But when I was applying to rabbinical school, I had to write pages and pages about my theology, and I had whole classes to figure out what I believed. And then I learned that our teacher, Rabbi Neil Gillman, of blessed memory, believed certain things on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and other things Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. (He used that as an example of how theological consistency is not necessary, how we can believe different things at different moments,

how all language for God is metaphorical and we can need or prefer different metaphors at different times.)

My faith is not an easy one to put on a bumper sticker.

Rabbi David Wolpe, a well-known Conservative rabbi, of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles, wrote recently that “many Jews find that what they believe cannot be transmitted, and what can be effectively transmitted they cannot believe”

(<https://jewishreviewofbooks.com/philosophy/10247/between-literalism-and-liberalism/?login=1617323785>). (I’m grateful to Rabbi Zohar Atkins for writing a bit about this here: <https://whatiscalledthinking.substack.com/p/how-much-does-transmissibility-matter> and getting me thinking about it.)

Subtle, metaphoric, pluralistic, “liberal” theology that is not so certain of itself, is not easy to articulate, much less transmit. Literalism, orthodoxy, are easier to articulate and transmit, but harder to believe, in this modern, or post-modern, era.

So, what we believe cannot be transmitted, and what can be effectively transmitted neither we nor our children believe.

So what are we to do?

I want to suggest that we show, not tell. That’s the catchphrase in storytelling and novel-writing, and I want to reflect on Passover for a moment as an opportunity fresh in our minds to illustrate showing rather than telling, because the Seders effectively transmit something important, but maybe not what we expect.

In one sense, the Seder is set up to convey the belief, the message, that God took us out of Egypt (God and not an angel...) with a mighty hand and an outstretched... arm. You know the story.

But for those of us of different belief, who struggle with that narrative, we might have all sorts of ways of deriving meaning for ourselves from the seder, whether by feeling like we’re walking in our ancestors’ footsteps by using a great-grandmother’s matzah holder, or recalling the voices and pronunciations of people who are long gone would read the Haggadah. We might find meaning in connecting to Israel at our seders, or thinking about modern slavery, or the ways we have been oppressed by Covid this year, or by technology now every year.

But in the end, what we’re communicating, to ourselves, our children, and everyone at our seders, is that this very thick, rich ritual, can speak to us, and can speak to them, and can speak to everyone.

The Seder is perhaps the best example of this. But just think for a moment about all the metaphors and meanings that can be put on lighting a menorah. Or lighting Shabbat candles. Or keeping some form of kashrut.

The message becomes that Jewish tradition is a canvas on which we can paint our own questions, struggles, and experiences.

Maybe you’ve been thinking these last few minutes about what the person, the people, you are remembering this morning believed. Memory is about recalling the past, but also figuring out how to translate it into the present. As we prepare for Yizkor, what did the people you are remembering believe, and how do you translate those beliefs into our present, into your life?