

Rabbi Billy Dreskin
Rosh Hashanah Morning
Sep 30, 2019 – 1 Tishrei 5780
Woodlands Community Temple

Faith

When I began my sabbatical back in January, my intention was to write a book about Jonah. We were coming up on his tenth yearzeit and it seemed a good use of the time you so kindly bestowed upon me. But then I began writing. I composed four chapters, after which I set down my pen and put the book away. I wasn't feeling it. There was nothing about this book that I was loving, except the *idea* of writing a book.

What would I do with the remaining five months and three weeks?

Wandering through my house, I noticed a collection of music instruction manuals. I'd always dreamed I would one day learn how to create instrumental arrangements for songs I'd written, and learn production techniques for getting those parts recorded. So that's what I did.

I spent a full month studying, then I turned on my computer where music production software had been waiting, daring me to try and harness its almost magical powers, and shape musical ideas into actual recordings. Then, as my six months neared their completion, I learned how to share my music with the world. So when you go home today, you can search for "Billy Dreskin" on pretty much any streaming service and you'll find the five songs that I arranged and produced, as well as the music I created over a twenty-seven year period from 1982 until 2009 with a group called Begeg Kefet.

This is a sermon about faith. It begins with mine, a faith in possibilities that got me through a brief period of disappointment when my sabbatical plans fell through, and continues with your faith, with the faith that each of us nurtures, or doesn't, throughout our lives.

Faith is a difficult topic these days. Religious faith is always under fire and, more and more, our faith in humanity as well.

Some call me naive, others woefully misinformed, but I am chock full of faith – in God, and in humankind.

Helen Keller wrote, "Optimism is the faith that leads to achievement. Nothing can be done without hope and confidence." I love these words. First, I think they apply to my sabbatical experience, having discovered that my original goals were a no-show but sticking around to see what else might develop. More importantly, these words apply to your and my shared experience in the human family.

Just a few weeks ago, I learned about Greta Thunberg, a remarkably brave, impassioned and incredibly well-spoken young woman who, at age sixteen, has organized a world-wide campaign

to combat global climate change. Mincing no words, Greta Thunberg, addressing the World Economic Forum in Davos, admonished, “You say you love your children above all else, and yet you are stealing their future in front of their very eyes.” She scolded the British Parliament, saying, “Those who will be affected the hardest are already suffering the consequences. But their voices are not heard. Is my microphone on? Can you hear me?” Everyone’s impressed by Greta, but she has no interest in patronizing words. Here in America, Greta told Congress, “Save your praise, we don’t want it. Don’t invite us here to tell us how inspiring we are without doing anything about it.”

Wow! Greta says, “You are never too small to make a difference.” I am so encouraged by her determination and her faith, and that of anyone (maybe some of you?) who join her campaign.

When a rabbi mentions faith, we assume he’s talking about God. Like Greta Thunberg, Judaism boldly and unapologetically demands that we believe: Greta, that we believe in our power to effect change for the better; and Judaism, that we believe in God’s power in the world. The question is, “Why would we be interested in doing that?”

Cynics will accuse religionists of protecting our turf. “Of course he wants you to have faith,” they will tell you, “it keeps the synagogues in business.” Skeptics will point at us and laugh. How can you have faith in something that doesn’t exist?

But God is serious business. Believing in some idea of God has far less to do with God and everything to do with us. The logic is simple. To live in a universe in which we are accountable only to ourselves, with little or no responsibility for anyone or anything else, is the height of arrogant selfishness and, Greta Thunberg would likely tell you, foolishness.

We nurture our self-centeredness at our own peril.

But where does the motivation to altruism, to a *selfless* concern for others, come from?

I’m not saying that God commands it, which is what the Torah *does* say. But if we read the Torah as more of a metaphor, God’s voice is not a literal one but is our very *human* sense that: a) wherever Creation came from, it’s a gift to us that shouldn’t be wasted in a reckless and foolish manner; and, b) our faith in God becomes a symbolic act that represents our faith in there being a reason for our existence beyond simple evolutionary luck. This is not to say that we humans were placed here by a Divine being to become the top of the food chain. Whether God is within our belief system or not, we are here, and we ought to show our appreciation for that, and act accordingly.

Last week, March for Our Lives, a movement begun by survivors of the Parkland High School shooting, released a harrowing video advertisement showing kids getting ready to go back to school. Each child was showing off something given them to prepare for the new year: a new backpack, new notebooks, new sneakers for running from an active shooter, new socks for

bandaging a fellow student's wounds, a new phone for quietly texting mom or dad from their hiding place.

It utterly confounds me how many people in this country will place their desire to own a gun above their desire to see that children can safely learn in school, willing to sacrifice them on some altar to a false god, precisely the kind of behavior religious faith is supposed to abolish. I just can't comprehend it. I know that, for the NRA, it's likely about money and keeping their organizational coffers filled. But for everyday Americans? They're not making money off of guns. Why wouldn't 100% of us want our kids and our grandkids to be safe?

If there is a crisis of faith to be had, it's our faith in humanity. Never in my life have I experienced as much disappointment in people's behavior as in these past few years.

I was born after World War II, after the Holocaust, after the rebirth of the State of Israel, and amidst the victories of the Civil Rights Movement. I thought the planet was on an upward trajectory and that life was improving for everybody everywhere. Even where starvation or war still existed, it was only a matter of time before those too were completely eradicated.

Fifty years ago in 1969, I was twelve and too young to attend Woodstock. But perhaps because I'm the youngest of six brothers and sisters, I got caught up in that festival's bright-eyed optimism. Burk Uzzle, a freelance photographer who shot the iconic cover for the Woodstock music album, said, "[I] get to Woodstock, and here are all the hippies that everyone thought were going to ruin the world, but these people decide to look after each other." Robin Williamson, who performed at Woodstock with The Incredible String Band, said, "I genuinely thought that the world had come to a kind of pivotal point and that things were going to get better. I really thought that things like money would become obsolete and war would become historical." Carlos Santana, who was a relatively unknown guitarist with the good fortune to get a gig at Woodstock, said, "I hope [we can] have a Woodstock in every city, every weekend. Because we need the colors. We need the balloons. We need the barbecues. Filipinos, Irish, Italian – we just need everybody to become a creature that celebrates being alive."

This was the world I grew up in, where so many had truly and authentically learned the value of loving each other. We were going to build Utopia!

1969 was also the year that Apollo 11 landed on the moon, another glorious moment which made us think everything was really getting better. If we could put a human being on a rock 239,000 miles away, what couldn't we do?

I did not become a rabbi to grieve the shortcomings of humankind. After I was ordained, I really thought that I would someday *soon* offer a prayer of thanks that "peace on earth" had finally arrived.

Turns out, having fallen short of these national and global aspirations, we really do need faith

this year.

Judaism has been trying to formulate principles of faith ever since the Garden of Eden. “Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat, but as for the tree of knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it; for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die.” God wanted us to be blissfully ignorant of the world, or so (in the beginning) it appeared, remaining sheltered in the Garden where we would be taken care of forever. That world view lasted about as long as it took to say, “Wait. There’s a tree of knowledge?” Curiosity ... you know what it did to the cat. Living outside the Garden, in a world slightly less than paradise, was going to require new articles of faith.

In first century Egypt, Philo of Alexandria enumerated five articles of Jewish faith: God is; God is one; the world was created by God; Creation is one, and God rules Creation.

About a thousand years later, Saadia Gaon, who lived in tenth century Iraq, had a similar list but added: God has no body, God gave us the Torah, God calls us to live lives of goodness, and God rewards the righteous with an eternal afterlife.

Then, in twelfth century Spain, Moses Maimonides authored the Thirteen Principles of Faith, which were criticized and ignored for hundreds of years, but today are enshrined in two beloved songs, *Ani Ma’amin* and *Yigdal*, evidence of their having become the most widely accepted statement to date. Elaborating on the works of both Philo and Saadia, the Rambam adds: God is the object of our prayers, the words of God’s prophets are true, God is all-knowing and all-powerful, Torah is the one true expression of God’s will, and God will send a redeemer – a Messiah – to save us all.

I’d be very surprised to find anyone in this tent who subscribes to every one of these statements. I will assert, however, that if we read them metaphorically, most of them can work even for infidels like you and me.

For example, I do believe that God will send a redeemer. In fact, God has already sent a redeemer. It is, they are, you and me. Greta Thunberg said it. We have the power to save this planet. We just have to come together and do it.

Do you know the hasidic story of the great Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Horowitz? The week before Passover, he preached on the plight of the poor, on their needs for the coming seder and Passover week that would follow. They would need matzos and kosher wine and supplies for a proper seder meal. When asked if his sermon did the trick, he replied, “It did half the trick. The poor have agreed to receive our tzedakah. I just don’t know if everyone else will give.”

Again and again, we learn that there are plenty of resources on this planet, enough to take care of everyone. We can grow enough food, provide clean water and energy, teach every child, and for an honest day’s work offer a living wage.

So why haven't we?

Gus Speth, an environmental lawyer who founded the Natural Resources Defense Council, wrote, "I used to think that the top environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse and climate change. I thought that thirty years of good science could address these problems [but] I was wrong. The top environmental problems are selfishness, greed and apathy — and to deal with these, we need a cultural and spiritual transformation, and we scientists don't know how to do that."

That, my friends, is a crisis of faith.

Fifty years ago, as the world watched astronauts Neil Armstrong, Buzz Aldrin and Michael Collins pilot us to the moon, as with Woodstock there was a wonder and a feeling that nothing could stop the march of progress. But not just any progress. Progress toward harmony and peace. Even though the Apollo program was a Cold War strategy to beat the Russians to the moon, only political and military functionaries saw it that way. The rest of us were convinced that, given time and attention, we can and we will make things right.

Let me tell you a little about my tenth grade Confirmation class. Each year, I take them GODshopping. With a name that belies its significance, my goal is to demonstrate to our young people that Judaism has always proffered a multitude of paths for looking at and understanding God. The possibilities for belief range from a God that hears and responds to personal prayer to One that isn't even aware we exist, isn't even aware *It* exists, yet is somehow still responsible for the existence of life. And since none of this can be proven, it is most definitely a leap of faith. But it's not just a leap of faith in God, it's a leap of faith that life has a noble purpose, that we aren't here just to survive; we're here to make things better for every inhabitant on this amazing blue marble.

I take the Confirmands on this shopping trip in the hope that they will learn that believing in God is a strategy to combat selfishness, a path to civic duty and meritorious service. The purpose of faith in God is to remind us that we didn't put ourselves here and, from wherever we come, we are capable of expressing gratitude for our existence by performing acts of exquisite selflessness.

I have my own Principles of Faith, you know. They're fairly simple (which is probably why I'm not famous for them): Believe in God, and believe that God has something to say to you.

That's pretty much it: Believe in God, and believe that God has something to say to you. With that theology, I have spent most of my life grateful for the gifts of being alive, of sharing life with others, of witnessing the magnificence of this world, and ... and this is vital ... the profound sense of debt that I owe something in return. In my quest for knowledge of *how* I ought to be living, in whatever ways I go about it I feel compelled to listen for God's voice, to pay attention when wisdom comes my way — which admittedly can emanate from the unlikeliest of places — lest I be guilty either of wasting or selfishly hoarding my life.

God is a mystery. I know that. God may not even exist. I know that too. But I also know that I *want* God to exist. And I live my life as if that's true, as if God exists, as if God is my Creator, and as if God has something to say to me. And I spend my life listening: listening to Torah, listening to teachers, listening to you.

God may only be a metaphor for my hopes about life and the world, but I am literally a better person because I have chosen to include God in my life.

My son Jonah died ten years ago when he was nineteen years old. Full of promise, of kindness and generosity, of creativity and exuberance, his death was an overwhelming loss for me and a profound loss, I truly believe, to the world. For the first six weeks after Jonah died, I hardly moved. And to this day, I still cry for him, because I will always feel the pain of his death. But my tears are also a tribute to him. He should never be forgotten, and his death should never not hurt.

But as a person of faith – having nothing at all to do with God, with being a rabbi, with Judaism or any religion, but having everything to do with faith that *life never ceases to be worth living* – I resolved, after grieving Jonah's death, to return to everything that was important to me: loving my family, loving this community, and loving the world. Now I do all of these in part to honor Jonah's memory, to love as he would have loved, and to hold onto my faith because *there are so many more reasons for doing so than not*.

I have a musical coffee mug at home that reads, "13/8. 6/4. These are difficult times." As the President prohibits California from adhering to stronger emissions standards than the rest of the country, as the Senate refuses to even debate gun laws, as white supremacists continue to feel emboldened in their acts of pure evil, I think of Shutruk Nahunte, who was king of Elam during the twelfth century BCE in what is today modern-day Iran. All that remains of him is a monument he erected to himself that reads, "I am Shutruk Nahunte, King of Anshan and Susa, Sovereign of the land of Elam. I destroyed Sippar, took the stele of Niran-Sin, and brought it back to Elam, where I erected it as an offering to my god, Inshushinak." Today, no one remembers Shutruk Nahunte. His life and his exploits have disappeared into dusty, unopened tomes of history that no one cares to read. Why? Because Shutruk Nahunte exploited and plundered. He did nothing to better the world in which he lived. Remind you of anyone?

I doubt we will ever be rid of those who are indifferent to the welfare of others, who care only about increasing their fame, possessions, and power. History will not treat them kindly.

They will deserve that.

But those who care, those who labor for the benefit of others, I have faith in the promise of their work. I continue having faith in the promise of *your* work, of the time and money that you invest in feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, cleaning the air and water, getting rid of the guns, welcoming immigrants, and protecting those who are already here.

I will always have more faith than others can destroy, and I pray that you will too.

Rabbi Nakhman of Breslov taught, “One should believe in God through faith, not because of miracles.” I love Rebbe Nakhman’s teaching. It reminds me not to wait for God to save us, but to understand that, like Dorothy’s ruby red slippers, the power has been ours all along. And the mantra she used to activate the magic in those shoes, “There’s no place like home,” let those words serve as our mantra as well, because there *is* no place like home. Together, with unshakeable faith that it *can* be done, let us come together and perfect this great gift of life that has come to us ... from God or wherever.

That would be more than enough miracle for us all, wouldn’t it?

Michael Hargrove was at the airport to pick up a friend. He noticed a man stopping to greet his family. To each of his three children the man gave a long, tender hug, stopping to say how much he had missed them and loved them. He then gave his wife the longest, most passionate kiss, gazed into her eyes and told her, "I love you so much!" Realizing that he was gawking, Hargrove nervously asked, "Wow, how long have you two been married?" Fourteen years came the answer, to which Hargrove said, “Well, how long have you been away?” Two days, they said. Hargrove was stunned. Almost offhandedly, hoping to end his intrusion with some semblance of grace, he offered, "I hope my marriage is always that passionate." The man looked Hargrove straight in the eye, and with an intensity of focus and commitment, he said, "Don't hope, my friend. Decide."

*Avinu Malkeynu ... God, Heavenly Parent, Cosmic Whatever ... kudos on Creation. You really did make something quite remarkable. Please accept our sincerest apologies for messing things up, and for standing by while others have messed things up. During these Holy Days, may we renew our faith that things can be made better, that Your Creation is resilient and can be repaired, and that we are resilient and can move beyond hoping, beyond praying, and decide, choose, to finally rebuild the Garden that You gave us back in the beginning, so that the children, who can do nothing but rely on us until we are no longer reliable, so that they can eat from the Tree of Knowledge and *know* that the universe, whatever its origins, is beautiful, exceptionally good, and well worth our saving.*

L’shana tova tikatevu ... may we not just be inscribed, may we become inscribers ... in this and every year’s Book of Life.