



woodlandscommunitytemple

מקום שלבי אוהב
THE PLACE THAT MY HEART HOLDS DEAR

50 Worthington Road
White Plains, NY 10607

914.592.7070 www.wct.org

Rabbi Billy Dreskin

הרב זאב בן חיים אשר וחייה דרסקין

Kol Nidre
Sep 27, 2020 – 10 Tishrei 5781
Woodlands Community Temple

Faith in God, Faith in People, Faith in Life

Part one

It's been four thousand, two hundred and twenty-one days since Jonah died. Eleven years, six months, and nineteen days since that sweet, incorrigible nineteen year old took his last breaths on a street in Buffalo. I remember someone having remarked, maybe six months later, they were glad my grief had ended so I could come back to temple. I remember thinking, will this grief ever end?

Turns out, no. I doubt that many of us ever stop fully grieving over the loss of a child, a sibling, a parent - a list that expands outward as far as our heart needs to. The death of a loved one leaves a mark, to be sure.

Yet I did come back to Woodlands. And I loved doing so. I never stopped grieving for Jonah. It quieted down. It rarely keeps me from living my life. But that's probably the point, isn't it? Grief is now *part* of my life. Just as happiness and anger and surprise and so many other emotions are as well.

About a year ago, I read an article in the New York Times, entitled, "Surviving the Death of My Son After the Death of My Faith." A woman who'd once been a devout believer in God and God's saving power but had set all that aside, found herself flailing hopelessly after the death of her baby.

She wrote, "What I had not anticipated about the cost of losing my faith was that it would no longer be possible to deceive myself. I could no longer make a pact with any higher being. No hours of service could convince a God that I deserved to have this child again. Whatever I had done to deserve him once, I was not worthy of him twice."

I thought, "And even if you *had* maintained your faith, do you think you would have gotten your child back?"

Her faith and mine differ by degrees. She lost faith in a God who was supposed to reward good people, and not let bad things happen to them. My faith has never required that of God. As many of you have heard me say, "The world is imperfect. Things go wrong. People die. Despite that, I remain grateful. Everyday. Grateful for the Big Bang, and for gravity, and for the regular cycles of night and day, and of winter and spring. For all these, I thank God and require nothing more." My only prayer is, "You keep the stars in the sky, I'll watch over my family and community."

So when Jonah died, I never blamed God or lost faith. I blamed gravity but certainly wouldn't wish gravity to vanish because it didn't prevent my child from dying. As a matter of fact, Jonah's loss caused my faith to increase. Before his death, I'd never believed in an afterlife. I'd always thought, "I don't need to live forever." But once Jonah was gone (to wherever it is we go), I missed him. And since nobody can tell me what lies beyond that "impenetrable veil,"¹ whether it's there or it's *not* there, I decided to believe it's there. Not that I want to get there anytime soon, but when I do I'd really like to give my boy a hug.

When I recite the Sh'ma, I don't think about a God "who did this to my child." I think about a God who everyday makes possible so much wonder and delight in the universe. I think about a price that comes with that wonder and delight; namely, the possibility of disappointment and loss. But I'm always grateful, for what is, and for what remains: memory, family, community, and love.

Part two

About a year ago, I had a conversation with some members of my family, who wanted to know, "Is the Angel of Death really that dumb that it would confuse a baby with an elder? Or mix people up if their names are the same?" They were referencing, of course, the generations-old Jewish practice of choosing names that don't endanger a person's life, more according to Eastern European superstition than Jewish religion but adopted by Ashkenazic Jews just the same.

My father had scarlet fever when he was a kid and my grandmother changed his name to Hayyim because why would the Angel of Death ever take the soul of a person whose name means "life." Sometimes a young person who was ill would be renamed Alter, also to fool the Angel of Death. Alter means "old person." My grandmother herself, when one of her sons married a woman who shared her name, couldn't live with that and changed hers so that, if she grew ill and the Angel of Death came looking for her, it wouldn't choose the wrong person.

These customs may seem antiquated and naive, but they speak to the level of faith that has persisted in the Jewish community for countless generations (in all communities really, but I'm only qualified to speak about this one).

Ever since Egypt, ours has certainly been a shaky relationship with God. Rescued from slavery by an unseen yet omnipotent cosmic power, it didn't take more than three months to pass before we were dancing the Mambo around a Golden Calf. Even after they got that straightened out and Moses brought down a second set of commandments, we've been breaking them ever since. Some, because we're lazy. Some, because we object to them. And some, because we've stopped believing.

Faith is a fascinating creature. In a world where God cannot be proved nor can God be disproved, the devout atheist is of as much faith that there *isn't* a God as the believer who insists there is. Me? I take the middle road. I believe there's something; I just don't know what. And because I find it hopeful to believe in God, to believe that there is some kind of thread that weaves its way through the cosmos and gives meaning to our existence, I *choose* to believe.

¹ Gates of Prayer for Weekdays and at a House of Mourning (CCAR)

And while some things make little sense at their surface levels - like the misadventures of a confused Angel of Death - I love these customs not because of what they say about God and angels, but what they say about us.

I recently watched a television show where an immortal being has been imprisoned for wanting his life to end. On the one hand, the Continuum - the immortals' world - feels the need to protect this being from himself. At the same time, they don't want him to move freely through their communities for fear he will persuade others that living forever isn't such a gift.

As with the Angel of Death, this TV show says more about us than it does about immortals.

We want to live. We don't want to die. But we know that, being human, we have to die. And living *well* becomes all the more urgent and meaningful because of that.

Which might be why our tradition goes to such great lengths to identify what *isn't* "living well" - we like to use the word "sin" to label these things. On Yom Kippur, we've gotten so good at listing our sins, we make an acrostic out of them so that when we run out of letters, we move on to something else. Ashamnu is one way that we identify what isn't "living well." We may not understand anything about where we go when we die, but we have a lot of faith in where we think we should go while we're alive.

Part three

In Malcolm Gladwell's 2019 book, "Talking to Strangers," he delivers an uncharacteristically bleak message. His thesis is that each of us, many times in the course of our life, comes face-to-face with people we don't really know. Gladwell suggests that most of us, when meeting or working with someone new, "default to truth." That is, we naturally assume people are open and honest. He concludes that, as a result, we're doomed to misunderstand one another, and recommends that we not trust anyone.

The reason we call ourselves Woodlands Community Temple and not Gladwell Community Temple (well, there are many reasons but one of them) is the message that we bring to you. Gladwell's message is Donald Trump's message, is the message of many a conspiracy theorist as well; namely, that the world is a frightening, dangerous place, and you'd best get ready to defend yourselves from those who are out to rob you, cheat you, steal your job, break into your home, infect you with the coronavirus, and whatever other spine-chilling threat they can conjure.

But that's not our message. That's not the Jewish message. Judaism acknowledges there's danger out there. There *are* people who will swindle you, riverbanks that will overflow and flood your town, and Covid-19 that'll threaten your life. But along with that, Judaism teaches that there's always hope and optimism and the importance of making a commitment and a contribution toward building a better world.

And trust? It *is* our default. Because for society to endure, we must reach out to one another, we must extend a helping hand to each other, and we must form partnerships that increase our ability to effect change for the better. Our Torah is a social contract. On the surface it's about devotion to God. But in fact, it's about devotion to humanity. The rules, the mitzvot, that God gave us, comprise a framework (and actually, a pretty good framework) for getting along with each other, for managing our trustiness alongside our untrustworthiness, allowing

the two to amalgamate into the proper recipe for building a functioning, effective society.

Faith in God is the scaffolding on which we build our faith in each other. We needn't believe in the God of the Torah in order to learn the lessons that God conveys in the Torah. Faith in each other is like herd immunity. We're never going to get everybody in the world to behave, but if we can get enough of us to stand behind documents like the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, behind institutions like the Judicial, Legislative and Executive branches of our government, then those documents and those institutions will be able to withstand attacks from those who've lost faith in our society's ability to foster community and to protect its members. Herd immunity indeed.

Rabbi Hayyim of Tszanz would tell his students, "Some people will refuse the requests of a hundred beggars because one of them might be a fraud. But the merit of tzedakah is so great that I will give to a hundred beggars even if only one might actually be in need."²

This is who we are. This is who we must be. Trust, don't trust, but look for a path to redemption - a path to redeem others, a path to redeem ourselves. When my dad got scarlet fever, my grandmother feared for his life. She turned to religion and changing his name as an expression of her hope and insistence that his life could be saved.

When my son died, I was so grief-stricken that I cried for weeks. As the tears dried, my grief quieted down, and I was able to live again. Not only had I *not* lost hope, my hope was stronger than ever before because I was determined to channel my *continuing* grief into something positive. My life is an act of gratitude for all that remains even after such profound loss. I strive to make every breath, every word and every step an expression of thanksgiving for my continued connection to my family, my friends, my work, this community, and a big, beautiful world that's so worth being part of and doing something to make better. Establishing the Jonah Maccabee Fund here at Woodlands and the Jonah Maccabee Foundation in the wider community became vital conduits through which my family's powerful belief in human goodness focused our hearts and spirits on remaining faithful to the dreams of our ancestors, the faith that life is and remains good, and joyful, and purposeful, and that it is our humble honor to do what we can to make it even better.

In the end, my mind comes back to a painting that was found at an archaeological site on the wall of an ancient temple. The painting was that of a king ... who was forging a *chain* from his *crown*. Nearby, in another scene, the painting showed a slave ... who was forging a *crown* from his *chain*. Beneath that painting, these words were inscribed: "Life is what one makes it, no matter of what it is made."

Avinu Malkeinu, we come to you this Yom Kippur seeking forgiveness. In the course of these twenty-four hours, we will carefully detail the times and places that we've fallen short. And we will beg You, on the merit of our ancestors, before the Gates of Repentance close at sundown tomorrow, to grant us atonement. What we really want is for our faith to be made strong and true, to return home (such as it is during this pandemic) fortified with renewed sense of how we ought and want to live. Life will hit us hard. It always does. We're neither invulnerable nor immortal. So may our days be filled with honorable thoughts and deed, may the people we love be glad we are here, and may the world benefit from the brief time we spend in it.

² Darkhei Hayyim (1962), p 137

Ken y'hee ratzon ... may these words be worthy of coming true.

Benediction

A year after Jonah died, among the many things I did in his memory, which ranged from creating a foundation to stopping by Fuddrucker's in Paramus for a hamburger, I made a Facebook group called, "Join if you're one of the 6.8 billion people on earth!" It was a humorous response to all of the "Join if" groups that were popping up, but it was just the kind of thing Jonah would have loved, taking a shot at bringing together the entire human family underneath one super-colossal umbrella.

Earlier this evening we read, "Kol Nidrei is a moment of recognition - a sound that brings us back to our people." ¹ Avinu Malkeinu, in these next twenty-one hours, help us to truly hear the words of faith and hope that our tradition has gifted to us. May we fully welcome them into our hearts and into our souls so that, regardless of how easy or difficult our lives have been, our lives are, we will leave this year's "tent" more determined than ever to live lives of goodness and faith - ever hopeful, ever confident, that this flawed world of ours is worthy of protection, of progress, and of our individual and communal efforts to make it a home for us all, and bring our family - the entire human family - underneath one super-colossal umbrella.

Tzom kahl - may we hunger for justice and peace.