

Living a Life That Matters: Belief in God, Belief in Good

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I would like to begin my sermon today by sharing with you a conversation which took place in my office during this past year. This conversation does not have an obvious connection to Yom Kippur. And yet, as I have reflected on it, I realized that this moment, on this, the holiest day of the year, is exactly the right time to share with you my thoughts prompted by this conversation.

It all began with a frantic call from the mother of a seventh grade student.

“Rabbi, we must meet with you immediately. This is an emergency!”

“Is everyone alright?” I asked.

“Oh, everyone is fine. It’s nothing like that”, she replied. (Here I use the boy’s Hebrew name to protect the identities of those involved) “It’s about *Moishe Pipik’s* bar mitzvah next month.”

In less than 15 minutes, there was a knock on my door and in walks *Moishe* with his mother, half a step behind. I begin:

“Well. What is this all about? What is the emergency? When we met last week, *Moishe’s d’var torah* had been completed, his *maftir* and *haftarah* were ready for prime-time. What is it?” I inquired.

“You are correct, Rabbi. We have everything planned: the Kiddush, the party...everything. We were even planning to surprise *Moishe*, a few weeks after the service here, with a celebration of his bar mitzvah at the Wall!

“You planned a surprise trip to Israel?”

“Not, Israel, Rabbi. China.”

“Oh. I guess I got my walls confused” I noted.

“In any event, everything is now on hold” she stated coldly. And now, as she spoke, she was glaring at poor *Moishe*, who had been sitting quietly, staring at the floor. “And why is it on hold?” Her voice now filled with emotion. “Well? We’ll? Tell him why the bar mitzvah and all of the plans are now on hold” his mother demanded.

And without looking up, he says in an undertone, “Because...I don’t believe in God”.

“Say it louder so the Rabbi can hear you!” I heard it clearly the first time, but perhaps, assuming some early-onset hearing loss, or, more likely, in order to emphasize the horror of his words, she wanted *Moishe* to repeat himself. So he did: “I don’t believe in God”.

And now, the mother, clearly in anguish over the words just spoken, turned to me: “Now what, Rabbi?”

At that moment, it was as if I could hear her thoughts as if spoken inside of me, a mix of anger, horror and sadness tinged with a bit of satisfaction thinking that she had stunned me into silence. I imagined her own thoughts going something like this:

Ah ha! Talk about “Ask the Rabbi”?! I have really stumped you! Now let’s see you come up with an answer for my “rebellious son”, (a trait, no doubt, he inherited from his father), that will convince him to go through with his bar mitzvah. Certainly, Rabbi, you have never been confronted with anything like this. Never, since Baruch Spinoza was excommunicated for his heretical thoughts in the 17th century has a bar mitzvah boy confronted a rabbi with such a dilemma.

At the same time, I know you can be clever: After all, you figured out how to give both Aunt Bessie and Uncle Mordy an Aliyah at Moishe’s bar mitzvah so that the two of them would not be standing near each other at any point. Even so, Moishe is very stubborn (a trait he also inherited from his father). Let’s see you get this this bar mitzvah back on track, although I doubt you can do it. And make it fast: I have a meeting with the caterer later this afternoon to discuss the Kiddush after services....

I cleared my throat.

“*Moishe*, this God that you don’t believe in, what is it exactly that you don’t believe?”

“All of it!” he stated.

“What is the ‘all of it’ that you don’t believe?”

“You know. All of it. That God is in heaven, watching us and controlling what happens in the world. All of it.”

“Oh” I said, with a sigh of relief. “That God. I don’t believe in that God either”.

“What do you mean you don’t believe it?” *Moishe* counters. “How can you not believe it? You’re the rabbi!” Before I can respond, *Moishe’s* mother faints.

After reviving *Moishe’s* mother, I tried to reassure them both. Nowhere in Jewish tradition is it required that a bar mitzvah boy believe in God in order to have his bar mitzvah service. The service would go on, I informed them both, as planned. (As I provided this bit of information, I could see *Moishe’s* mother trying to stifle her triumphant smile. *Moishe*, on the other hand, was clearly crestfallen). A few minutes later, calm had been restored. The crisis had been averted. The bar mitzvah was back on track to be celebrated four weeks hence. *Moishe* and his mother left... Yes, just another day in the office. By the way, the Kiddush was beautiful.

I have been thinking about that conversation during these intervening months and, despite the humor we can find looking back at the conversation, at the time, the discussion was actually quite serious. In fact, both the boy and his mother and, perhaps, some others who are here today, might, in fact, benefit from a more thorough discussion about God. And although each of us may believe somewhat differently, I thought I might share with you how I view resolve some of these questions personally. Indeed, as I lead High Holiday services for the 25th consecutive year, it occurred to me that I have never spoken directly about my own beliefs. And although what I share with you today is not a complete personal theology, I thought I would share a few of my personal beliefs about God, about my faith and even prompt some of those who share my own uncertainties and questions to think about this as well. First a word about belief.

Belief, does not arrive in our lives naturally, as, say, the abilities of gifted athletes or artists. To believe, to have faith is a choice. And, by definition, that belief is not provable. Belief resides in a realm apart from science and knowledge. One chooses to believe in order to answer questions which science cannot. Conversely, what we know from science lies outside the realm of belief. It is within the realm of religion and belief that one might look for answers to questions, such as “Why?: Why was the world created? What is the purpose of our lives?” These are not a scientific questions. These are religious questions and the answers are matters of belief. It is here that my beliefs begin.

My belief in God begins at the beginning: ***Bereshit bara Elohim / In the beginning, God created...*** These first words from the Torah provide for me the basis on which all else is built. What I learn first from these words is the proposition that there is a God and that God created the world. Next, since God created the world, all that has grown from that moment of creation to this moment reflects God’s handiwork.

To say that God created the world does not imply that God personally formed every aspect of nature with God’s skilled, Godly hands. It means that the process was set into motion by God, a process which includes the laws of nature and results in a world which reflects its Maker. Unlike the gods described in other ancient religions of Greece or Rome, I believe in a God that acts neither capriciously nor without intention. This world is not the result of happenchance or coincidence. We reside, I believe, in a world that was created for a purpose.

It is this sense of purposefulness which enables us to sense God’s presence in the world. It is for that reason, that we can look at the Rocky Mountains, or at a beautiful sunset over the ocean and feel God’s presence. These are the moments when we can stand and experience, as Heschel would say, “awe and wonderment” in the world. At those moment we can see the world around us as a blessing bestowed upon us by God.

This, by the way, gives us a bit of insight about how mystics see the world. Although I am not a mystic in practice, I find great depth and insight in the way the mystics describe the world as a reflection, of God’s handiwork at every step. The *S’fat Emet*, the great Chassidic mystic, for

example, wrote about the way he tries to see the world around him. He uses the recitation of the *Sh'ma* as a starting point:

Each day we declare that God is One, *Sh'ma Yisrael...Adonai Echad*. The simple meaning is that God is the only God. But the deeper meaning [of *Echad*] is that there is no existence other than God, (whose handiwork fills the world)...because everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, reflect God Himself. (*Sfat Emet*, quoted from Art Green, *The Language of Truth*, pp xxxvi – xxxvii).

For the *S'fat Emet*, if you know how to look, you can see God's reflection all around. If you know how to listen, creation's song of praise is audible. Everything in creation "sings God's praises", *HaShamyim misoprim k'vod eil*, in the words of the psalmist. To the mystic, everything is a reflection of God.

At the pinnacle of the Torah's creation story is the creation of human beings at the end of the sixth day. Human beings, unlike all other creations, are not simply by-products of the tectonic, cosmological processes by which the world was created. The creation of humanity happens individually. According to the Torah, God implants within each person a unique spark, a spiritual "flame", *ruach ha-elohim*. With this language, I believe, we express the unique spiritual and moral qualities which we possess. This is what places us on a higher, more "godly" plane than all other creations. If pressed to explain that spark, I cannot. Yet I believe deeply that it exists within each of us. And because of this I believe that each person is unique. Each of us carries a holy spark from God which is ours to nurture and grow.

Our challenge is to behave in ways that nurture and cultivate that divine spark implanted within each of us. Moreover, if others need help in nurturing and growing that spark, that is also our responsibility. When others forget that there is that spark within them, it is our job to remind them.

Last Thanksgiving, Lori, Talia and I went to serve meals at a small soup-kitchen in a church in West Philadelphia. The meal was called for 2:00 pm, but the line began to form by noon. The food had all been lovingly cooked by the daughters and helpers of Mother Patience. Mother Patience has directed the production of a weekly meal for this group for longer than anyone

can remember. In that part of Philadelphia those in need of a hot meal know which church to go to on which day and during which week. And the meal Mother Patience serves is, for many, their greatest culinary experience of the year. It is for that reason that the line out the door forms early.

As the group came in, they were welcomed by the rich aroma of their meal. Once the group had been seated, one could see the excitement on the faces of young and old, anticipating the meal that was about to be served. But before the meal began, the diminutive Mother Patience raised her powerful voice in the cadence of an old-time preacher, with an “Amen” in response to each point she made:

We cannot eat this meal at this moment. No! Do you know why? Because this is a Thanksgiving meal. And we cannot eat a Thanksgiving meal without giving thanks. And so I want to go around the room and ask each person to share with us one thing in their life that they are thankful for today.

And Mother Patience began and then called on those present, one after another, to share their thankfulness with the group:

I thank God that I have my family with me”

I thank God that I could come here at all today. Some days my hip hurts so much that I can't walk down the block. But today, I made it”.

One boy spoke up:

I thank God for all that I have and feel bad to other kids who don't have what I have.

I thank God that I have everyone here to eat with. Otherwise I'd be eatin' alone

After the sharing was complete, we served the meal. And as I dished out the food, I was thinking how moving it was to hear these tributes of thanksgiving from those who have so few worldly possessions. It was a reminder, to be sure, that the most important things are not physical. They are not material. Most important are relationships, most impactful, the presence of another human being.

But there was something else to learn from Mother Patience. When she asked each person to speak, she asked everyone else to listen. She wanted each speaker and listener to know that what was being said was important. She reminded each person that her life was important. She reminded each that their lives had meaning. They were more than just another person in line for a hot meal. Each person had inherent dignity and spiritual worth. And Mother Patience taught that there is upon the soul of each person, the imprint of God. Each person mattered to God.

Mother Patience reminded me that day that our job in this world is to bring to this world God's presence through the performance of deeds of kindness and compassion. And this is the same message which permeates the Yom Kippur services. We bring God's presence into the world when we, on a human level, embody in our lives the attributes we assign to God, attributes which we name and repeat throughout this Holy Day:

Adonai, Adonai, Ayl Rachum ViChanun..... God, merciful and compassionate, patient and abounding in faithfulness

Our Sages state this explicitly: by performing acts of *Chesed*, kindness, generosity, compassion and selfless concern for another person, we are bringing into this world the attributes of God. (See, for example, *BT Sotah 14a* and *Midrash Tehillim on Ps. 118:19*). And notice here, in this line which is repeated over and over throughout Yom Kippur, that it is how we treat each other (*Mitzvot she-ben adam l'chavro*) which is emphasized. Even on this most holy day, we are not focused on ritual performance (*Ben adam l'makom*). And this focus on inter-personal relations is intended to make a point.

There has always been a tendency, it seems, to consider the performance of ritual or the observance of Jewish Law matter most to God. But that is a mistaken view. Observance and ritual are important only when ritual observance leads us to act in certain ways toward others. Those are the actions that matter to God. And here is the point: *If God wants human beings to live, God wants our lives to matter. And, from a Jewish perspective, our lives matter most when we bring that which is godly into world by the way we interact with others.* This notion is not

only at the core of my beliefs. And I share this notion with one of the greatest of our Prophets, Isaiah.

This is exactly the message which we read from the Prophet Isaiah just a few minutes ago in the *haftarah*. There Isaiah rails against those who follow the laws scrupulously yet treat those around them with disdain and callous indifference. The Prophet does not hold back:

Do you think that you are behaving as God wants you to behave because you are fasting on Yom Kippur? Is this how God wants your lives to matter?

Speaking in the name of God, Isaiah thunders his condemnation:

This is not the purpose of the Fast on this day. The only fast which God wants is one that will make a difference in your lives and the lives of others. God's fast leads us to help those in need:

to unlock the fetters of wickedness, and untie the cords of oppression...To share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home. (Is. 57: 5-8)

The Prophet Isaiah excoriates the people not because they erred in the performance of some observance or ritual. He lashes out because they think that by reciting prayers, and saying all of the words and following the tradition they are doing what God wants them to do. But they are mistaken. All of our prayers and celebrations and rituals have a higher purpose and the Prophet wants us to strive for that higher goal. God does not measure our lives by calculating how we observe. We are measured by the way we behave toward others. Our lives are measured by the way we have impacted the lives of others.

How does one assure that one's life matter to this world? The most common approach begins with a belief that in order to matter one must strive for greatness. We want to be seen by others as great, by which we mean important and influential. And so, we seek more: larger homes, more expensive cars and greater wealth. We become impressed with size. And, indeed, this tendency may be natural and even evolutionary.

A few weeks ago, while my son and his family were visiting, Lori and I took our granddaughters, ages 3 and 5, to the Camden Aquarium. Before the visit we had spoken about all of the interesting fish, tortoises and even penguins we would see. Once we arrived, the girls had no interest in the fish who hid themselves in the sand, or the sea horses that bobbed around the underwater plants. What did they want to see? Anything that was big. Models of the biggest tortoises and sharks in the world.

And if you take kids to the natural History Museum, what do they want to see? Dinosaurs, Mammoths. The bigger the better. We seem to be drawn like magnets to that which is “super-sized”. We yearn for the superlatives of this world. We are fascinated by the tallest basketball players, the biggest linemen and even the richest presidential candidates. Living big means to some living a life that matters. But I believe that living a life that matters means measuring life by the depth and impact we have on those we touch. And sometimes we don’t even know the impact we have on others. It may even be the case that a small act of kindness can yield the most profound results.

One of the most important people in the Bible is a man whose name we don’t know. This person was no Abraham, Moses or David. If these more well-known figures are considered the Bible’s leading men, the character I refer to would surely win an award for the supporting role he has played (or as might have been referred to in the language of this week’s Emmy awards: “Supporting Role in a Limited Series”). He is simply identified as “*Ish Dotan*”, a guy from Dothan. And yet we owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude.

The sons of Jacob, our Patriarch, had gone off with their flocks looking for better lands to graze. When they did not return, Jacob sent his youngest son, Joseph, to find his brothers. Joseph is looking for his brothers to no avail until he sees someone in the distance. It is a man from the nearby city of Dothan. Joseph approaches the man to inquire whether this man had seen his brothers. The man said, “In fact I have”. *Ish Dotan* points in the direction in which the brothers were travelling. So why is *Ish Dotan* so important?

Were it not for the help of this anonymous man, Joseph might never have found his brothers. Had he not found them, he would not have been thrown into a hole by his brothers. He would

not, then, have been sold as a slave to the Midianites who were on their way to Egypt, where Joseph became the decipherer of the Pharaoh's dreams so that he was taken from the palace dungeon to the upper echelons of the advisors, so that he could later facilitate his brothers' and father's trip to Egypt. And had they not come to Egypt, they would not have been enslaved for Moses to take them out from Egypt. And, had they not come out of Egypt, cross the sea, become the Jewish People and enter the Land of Israel, I would be out of a job! No recognition was ever given to *Ish Dotan* by whose help, our history would not have taken place and there would have been not Jewish People.

Even though he may not have known his role of his important role in Jewish History, his life mattered deeply to us. His life mattered because, at the moment he needed to step forward, he did. And the fact that we don't know his name is intentional. It is a reminder that a quiet, anonymous life can matter greatly. And if a small encounter can have such grand implications, imagine the impact we might make in the lives of those with whom we have deeper and more sustained relationships is even more powerful

Among my favorite movies is the one I wait for every Chanukkah, "It's a Wonderful Life", starring Jimmy Stewart cast as George. George Bailey is the local banker, who is no heartless bureaucrat. He cares about the people in the town. He knows them and their families. And when unfounded rumors were instigated by the greedy competition, there was a run on George's bank. Everyone ran to pull their money out at the same time, placing the bank on the verge of failure. George was distraught. In fact, he was so depressed over what was occurring that he had thoughts of taking his own life, thinking that the world would be better off without him.

George's Guardian Angel, however, shows up to intervene and convince him not to commit suicide. Instead the Angel takes him on a journey to show him what the world would have looked like had George not lived. The pharmacist who had given out a wrong prescription, which George had caught, would have gone to prison. The brother George saved when he fell through the ice would have died, never becoming the war hero he would eventually become. George's

wife would have become a dowdy old maid, without husband or children. And as George viewed a world without him, he realized that his life did matter. He had not been the strongest, the wealthiest or the smartest. But he made profound differences in the lives of those he touched. He realized that he lived a life that mattered.

Speaking of movies, a few weeks ago, Lori and I saw Woody Allen's most recent film, "An Irrational Man". It is the story of a philosophy professor who has lost the meaning of his life. He was despondent, depressed and dejected to the point of being paralyzed by the meaninglessness of his life. But then, he comes upon an idea which will bring meaning back to his life. He realizes that if he can make the world a bit better, if only a scintilla better than before, his life will have meaning. The way he found to make the world a better place, however, was to murder someone he deemed to be a bad person.

The movie poses a question regarding "the greater good": Is it permissible to do something considered by most to be immoral, not to mention illegal, in order to make the world a better place? To the rest of the world, the professor was an irrational man. But in the world of the nutty professor, his actions were perfectly justifiable. He might have agreed that what he did was, in the narrow sense, not good. But he was adamant that his deed made the world a better place and that, because of that, his life now mattered. And that gave meaning to his life. For the professor, his need to matter superseded his need to be good. He would rather see himself as important rather than good. I believe, however, that he was mistaken. The God I believe in wants us to be good.

During my conversation with the bar mitzvah boy, *Moishe*, I asked him to explain the God he did not believe in. And, this quite articulate young man told me that he did not believe that God rewarded those who were good and punished those who were bad. And this, belief is held by lots of people. And, I think I know why. There is a simple confusion here between God and Santa Clause. It is Santa who rewards those good boys and girls with Xbox, iPhones and the like, not God. But according to this Santa Clause formula, one must weigh the inconvenience and boring nature of being good with the reward which shall be received. This is not a moral decision, therefore. This is a business decision. Yet it is the moral dimension of our lives, lives

defined by the battles we fight, the challenges we confront and the help which we offer which determines the way in which our lives matter.

There is here more to discuss, more to consider and more to share. I would like to continue this as a conversation and to accomplish that, I'll be teaching a course in the Fall connected to matters of faith. We are planning an adult retreat (over Presidents' Weekend) to discuss these matters as well. If you are interested in the course or the retreat, you will find information about them in the lobby. What is most important to me is that my thoughts constitute the beginning of deeper conversations.

I was sitting on a plane, waiting for our flight to leave as passengers were still squeezing down the aisle and checking their boarding passes to find their seats. As the passengers are passing by, a woman stops in her tracks, "Rabbi Cooper. Is that you?" I smiled, "It's me". "Oh", she continues. "I feel so much better knowing that you are on the plane"... I smiled again: "Yep. Me too".

People believe lots of things. That woman, for instance must have believed that, somehow I had a connection with airline pilot and hero Capt. Sully Sullenberger. It is important to think about what you believe. It is also important to know what you don't believe, especially when it comes to God.

There is a lot about God that I do not believe. I do not believe that God punishes us. I do not believe that people suffer because they did something that warrants punishment in that way. I do not believe that God favors either the Democrats or Republicans. (She is an Independent). And I do not and cannot believe in a God for whom the suffering or deaths of children are parts of some larger plan. Any God who needs for children to suffer needs to get another plan. No God of mine harms children.

But I do believe in a personal God, a relationship we can have with God. In moments of prayer, in quiet meditation, in the wordless chants which transcend that which is articulate, I believe that God hears. I believe that when evil, tragedy or pain touches us, God cries with us. I believe when we rejoice, God dances with us.

It has happened on many occasions that, in the course of a conversation, Someone will confide in the fact that they don't follow a particular tradition or they never pray because they don't believe in God. And if the context of the conversation is conducive to a longer discussion I may ask the following (and if there is not enough time for that discussion, you will now know what I am thinking):

Okay. If you don't believe in God, that's fine. The question which we all must answer is not, "What do you not believe in?" The question is: **But what do you believe in?** Ask yourself that question. Ask yourself

What do I believe in? What is it that makes your life matter?

Figure out how your life matters and to whom.

Spend some time today asking yourself: beyond wealth or power, where is my internal compass, my personal GPS leading me?

Where is that inner voice telling me to go?" And, equally as important, whose voice, other than your own, are you hearing?

If life begins and ends with us, life is small, finite and self-absorbing. If one says, "I believe only in myself", they are saying, "I do believe in God... and I am God" For most of us, we like to think that we do believe but somehow we are waiting for the sign that never comes. The mystics, as you know, see the signs all over creation. But, wherever those signs are seen and whenever those voices are heard, this I also believe: I believe that when we become complacent and satisfied with our lives, we no longer look for beauty in the world, when we no longer seek goodness in ourselves and each other. When we stop wondering "how are lives matter"?, when we are no longer concerned about those with whom we interact, we stop looking for God. And, when we stop looking for God, God stops looking for us.

