

**EREV ROSH HASHANA**  
**SEPTEMBER 12, 2007**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

In a recent Harris Interactive survey of 2306 adults across America amazing results were found. While 79% of Americans believe that there is a G-d, only 66% are absolutely certain of it. Protestants are more likely to go to church once a month or more often than Roman Catholics. Jews are the least likely to go to services once a month. And in perhaps the most astounding statistics 10% of Protestants, 21% of Roman Catholics and 52% of Jews do not believe in G-d.

I guess we number ourselves, those of us sitting here this first evening of Rosh Hashana 5768, among the 48% of Jews who do believe in G-d. But I don't really want to examine each of you individually by asking that question and putting you on the spot. I might be somewhat surprised by the response. There is no question on our membership survey for this congregation asking you whether you believe in G-d, we presume you do. Or do you? How do you define that G-d? Has your belief in a Divine Being in any way affected your life? Have you taught that belief to your children and grandchildren? Belief in G-d is not an easy task especially in the modern world in which we live. There are always answers given by science, by rational thinkers, and by skeptical critics who are astounded that people in the modern world believe in a G-d. Yet, I would wonder on what foundation they base this world for if there is no G-d. Why are we here?

It is customary to recite Psalm 27 during morning and evening services from Rosh Hodesh Elul until Shemini Atzeret. In a commentary on the Siddur Baruch She' mar, Rabbi Baruch HaLevi Epstein struggles to find a reason for this custom. He suggests that the practice may be based upon a Midrash connecting Psalm 27 to the Holidays of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. The Midrash states on the first verse of the Psalm that "G-d is my light and my salvation; my light on Rosh Hashana, and my salvation on Yom Kippur." While this Midrash could certainly serve as a source for this custom, Rabbi Epstein is troubled by another Midrash that seems to connect our Chapter not to Rosh Hashana but to Pesach. The Midrash recounts a number of events that occurred during the exodus from Egypt and claims that they are alluded to in our Psalm. "G-d is my light" refers to G-d lighting up the night with a pillar of fire. "G-d is my salvation" refers to G-d telling the Jewish people to stand and witness His salvation of the Jewish people. Based on this Midrash, Rabbi Epstein claims we should recite Psalm 27 on Pesach rather than during the month of Elul. However, in response to this dilemma, Rabbi Epstein suggests that the Talmud found reason to recite this Psalm during the High Holy Day period.

Rabbi Barry Gelman suggests that the reason this Psalm is recited at this particular time of year is that it delves into the search for the spiritual. "One thing I asked of G-d, for this I yearn; to dwell in the house of the Lord all of the days of my life, to behold His beauty, to pray in His sanctuary." Rabbi Gelman suggests following the Biblical commentator, Malbim, that even though the chapter refers to many types of physical salvation, as seen in the Holiday of Pesach, they are ultimately dependent on developing a relationship with

G-d. For Malbim, “the essence of this chapter is in spiritual recovery that can lead to physical salvation.”

Pesach seems to be connected more with physical salvation. We were redeemed from Egyptian bondage, we were liberated from slavery and thus at our Passover Seder while we recognize the spiritual nature of the redemption, we concentrate on its physical essence. The High Holy Days, on the other hand, represent the spiritual part of our world. There is no Biblical historical antecedent to these Days of Awe. Instead we spend most of our time in the Synagogue attempting to effectuate atonement, to ask forgiveness of G-d and to renew the relationship with the Divine Presence in our lives. Since the essential message of the Psalm is a spiritual one, Rabbi Gelman suggests, it was designated that it be said during the High Holy Day period. It is this time of year when we concentrate on our spiritual well-being.

In a commentary on this particular Psalm my colleague Rabbi Martin Cohen suggests that the author of the Psalm has one great spiritual goal in his mind: “To dwell in G-d’s physically perceptible presence, to gaze upon the beauty of G-d’s perceptibly existent self-manifestation, and to worship G-d in the fullest, most perceptibly real way possible.” The Psalmist desires to know G-d through the senses rather than solely through the intellect. It is a spiritual search recognizing that there are limits to human devotion and to human life and the spiritual need of every human being to feel close to G-d, to feel G-d’s presence in the world and to search for meaning in our lives.

This spiritual search is not easy. As Jews we learn to participate in our community through rites and rituals. From the very beginning of our religious education at home and in school we are taught how to properly integrate the rituals into our lives. Rarely is G-d brought into the equation. In fact, I would suggest, G-d is hardly mentioned in Jewish educational circles. That lack of discussion may often lead to crises of faith for our young people as they move into their college experience and meet people from wide spectrums of life. Devout Christians always talk of G-d. Should they meet devoted Muslims they will hear G-d-talk. Only Jews don’t seem to talk in that fashion. Is it because we don’t believe or is it because we simply don’t know how to articulate that belief?

Lest we believe that we are the only ones with that difficulty we are mistaken. A new book which was published about Mother Teresa, the winner of the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in ministering to the poor of Calcutta, penned a number of interesting and provocative thoughts about faith in her own words. While the world looked at Mother Teresa as the epitome of a person of faith it now emerges that she was so doubtful of her own faith that she feared that she was being a hypocrite. In a new book that compiles letters she wrote to friends, superiors and confessors, her doubts are obvious. Shortly after beginning work in Calcutta slums, she writes: “Where is my faith? Even deep down there is nothing but emptiness and darkness. If there be G-d please forgive me.” Eight years later she wrote: “Such deep longing for G-d, repulsed, empty, no faith, no love, no zeal.”

We ask ourselves if Mother Teresa was not sure of her faith, that G-d was present in her life, that there was a spiritual essence to her very existence, who are we to even be concerned about it? In fact, it is the role of every human being to attempt to connect with the Divine Presence. Sometimes that connection is difficult. There are moments of despondency, frustration and even lack of belief. There are other times when we feel G-d's presence in our lives, we acknowledge the spirit which motivates us and we sense a higher spirit which energizes our lives and gives us cause for meaning.

The High Holy Days come to challenge us on this search for G-d in our lives. There are no easy answers and no one way to come to G-d. But it is important that we search, that we long for the Presence, that we attempt to create a spiritual life along with our physical being. It is that spiritual life which separates us from the animal kingdom. Like animals we eat, sleep, defecate and yearn for sexual propagation of the species. But unlike animals we have a spiritual essence which searches for meaning in life, which attempts to make sense of the world in which we live and which longs for eternity.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin suggests that Yom Kippur above all other holidays reminds us of our spiritual essence. For twenty five hours we are not concerned with the physical. We don't eat, drink, anoint ourselves, perform sexual relations or concern ourselves with our physical needs. Instead, we spend time with our soul and our spirit. The words

“v'initem et nafshotaichem” are usually translated as “you shall afflict your souls,” and normally are understood stressing that we should stay away from the physical pleasures which we crave. But Rabbi Riskin suggests, based on the etymology of the words, that we should understand this phrase as searching for our soul to sing and to soar, to express that part of G-d which is within us, the spirit, separating us from the animal kingdom, longing for the Divine Presence and for meaning in our life. Yom Kippur, according to Rabbi Riskin, allows our soul to soar, to concern ourselves with the spiritual and not the physical, to taste a sense of the eternal and to yearn for G-d's presence.

In Chapter 27 of the Book of Psalms while the request of the author is formulated in terms of great longing for the earthly temple and for the Divine Spirit that dwells therein, his true wish is not limited to making a pilgrimage to the temple, or even to spending an extended period of time in G-d's sanctuary. His real desire is to attach himself to G-d, so that G-d will watch over him and protect him. He believes that achieving such closeness to G-d leads automatically to salvation from his enemies and victory over them. Sometimes he feels abandoned. So he reaches out to G-d whom he prays will envelop him with love, compassion and a welcoming spirit.

As we commence the New Year of 5768 I believe we have those same desires and those same needs. We desperately want to believe, we want to feel that closeness to G-d. We want our spirits to soar during the Ten Days of Repentance and indeed throughout the year, for we know that without that our lives are mundane and almost meaningless. We desire an appreciation of the Divine Presence in our lives to make meaning of our existence and to touch that sense of eternity which we pray will be ours after our physical presence is no longer evident on the face of this earth. Whereas Pesach is easy to

celebrate because we extol the physical presence of salvation by eating Matza and reenacting the story of our liberation from bondage by performing rituals which are fun and enjoyable, the High Holy Days are much more difficult to celebrate, to feel comfortable with and to enjoy. Their challenge is to concentrate on the spiritual, the eternal, our beliefs, and our search for meaning and significance on this earth. That is much more difficult and uncomfortable. But I would suggest it is necessary.

I don't intend to examine on these High Holy Days or any time during the year whether you believe in G-d or ask you to express that belief. But I do hope that during these days when we confront the very meaning of life that you will challenge yourself to examine the Divine Presence in your life. We all desire and need it. The Psalmist concludes his words with these phrases: "Hope in the Lord and be strong. Take courage, hope in the Lord." We pray that we too shall be strong in our faith, courageous in our search and be blessed to find significant meaning in our lives.

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**EREV ROSH HASHANA  
SEPTEMBER 12, 2007  
RABBI MICHAEL SCHWAB  
"If Not Higher"**

Based on the story of I.L. Peretz, translated by Marie Syrkin and edited by Rabbi Michael Schwab

It is a Jewish tradition to tell stories on the Eve of Rosh Hashanah -- Magical stories of inspiration and meaning. Stories that no matter how many times we hear them, they still continue to teach us what life is all about. Tonight I wish to begin by telling you such a story:

During the week of Rosh Hashanah, early every morning, at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the Rabbi of Nemirov would vanish.

He was nowhere to be seen—neither in the synagogue nor in the two Houses of Study nor at a minyan. And he was certainly not at home. His door stood open; whoever wished could go in and out, but not a living creature would be found within.

Where could the great Hasidic rabbi be? In heaven, no doubt. A rabbi has plenty of business to take care of just before the Days of Awe. Jews, God bless them, need livelihood, peace, health, and good matches. They want to be pious and virtuous. But our sins are so great, and Satan, of the thousand eyes, watches the whole earth from one end to the other. What he sees he reports; he denounces, he informs. Who can help us if not the holy rabbi! So off he went to heaven.

That's what the people *thought*.

But once, a Litvak came. And when he heard this story he laughed. You know the Litvaks. They think little of the Holy Books but stuff themselves with Talmud and law. So this Litvak points to a passage in the *Gemara*—it sticks in your eyes—where it is written that even Moses, our Teacher, did *not* ascend to heaven during his lifetime but remained suspended two and a half feet below.

Go argue with a Litvak!

“So where can the rabbi be”, they asked, “if he is not in heaven”?

“That’s not my business,” said the Litvak, shrugging. Yet all the while he is scheming to find out.

That same night, right after the evening prayers, the Litvak steals into the rabbi’s room, slides under the rabbi’s bed, and waits. He’ll watch all night and discover where the rabbi vanishes and what he does during the Penitential Prayers.

Someone else might have gotten drowsy and fallen asleep, but a Litvak is determined; he recites a whole tractate of the Talmud by heart to keep himself awake.

At dawn he hears the call to prayers.

The rabbi has already been awake for a long time. The Litvak has heard him groaning for a whole hour.

Whoever has heard the Rabbi of Nemirov groan knows how much sorrow for all Israel, how much suffering, lies in each groan. A man’s heart might break, hearing it. But a Litvak is made of iron; he listens and remains where he is. The rabbi, long life to him, lies on the bed and the Litvak *under* the bed.

Then the Litvak hears the other beds in the house begin to creak; he hears people jumping out of them, mumbling a few Hebrew words, pouring water on their fingernails, banging doors. Everyone has left. It is again quiet and dark.

Finally the rabbi arises. First he does what befits a Jew. Then he goes to the closet and takes out a bundle of peasant clothes: Linen trousers, high boots, a coat, a big felt hat, and a long, wide leather belt studded with brass nails. The rabbi gets dressed. From his coat pocket dangles the end of a heavy peasant rope.

The rabbi leaves the room and the Litvak follows him.

On the way out, the rabbi stops in the kitchen, bends down, and takes an axe from under the stove, puts it in his belt, and leaves the house. The Litvak trembles but continues to follow.

The hushed dread of the Days of Awe hangs over the dark streets. Every once in a while a cry rises from some minyan reciting the Penitential Prayers, or from a sickbed. The rabbi hugs the sides of the streets, keeping to the shade of the houses. He glides from house to house, and the Litvak continues after him. The Litvak hears the sound of his heartbeats mingling with the sound of the rabbi's heavy steps. But he keeps on going and follows the rabbi to the outskirts of the town. A small wood stands there.

The rabbi enters the wood. He takes thirty or forty steps and stops by a small tree. The Litvak, overcome with amazement, watches the rabbi take the axe out of his belt and strike the tree. He hears the tree creak and fall. While the penitential prayers are being recited in the town, the rabbi chops the tree into logs and the logs into sticks. Then he makes a bundle of the wood and ties it with the rope in his pocket. He puts the bundle of wood on his back, shoves the axe into his belt, and returns to the town.

He stops at a back street beside a small broken-down shack and he knocks at the window.

"Who is there?" asks a frightened voice. The Litvak recognizes it as the voice of a sick Jewish woman.

"I," answers the rabbi in the accent of a peasant.

"Who is I?", says the woman.

Again the rabbi answers in Russian. "Vassil", he says.

"Who is Vassil, and what do you want?"

"I have wood to sell, very cheap." And, not waiting for the woman's reply, he goes into the house. The Litvak steals in after him.

In the gray light of the early morning he sees a poor room with broken, miserable furnishings. A sick woman, wrapped in rags, lies on the bed. She complains bitterly, "Buy? How can I buy? Where will a poor widow get money?"

"I'll lend it to you," answers the supposed Vassil. "It's only six cents."

"And how will I ever pay you back?" said the poor woman, groaning.

The rabbi says, "See, you are a poor sick Jew, and I am ready to trust you with a little wood. I am sure you'll pay. You have such a great and mighty God, don't you trust Him for six cents?"

"And who will kindle the fire?" said the widow. "Have I the strength to get up? My son is at work."

“I’ll kindle the fire,” answers the rabbi.

As the rabbi put the wood into the oven he recited, in a groan, the first portion of the Penitential Prayers.

As he kindled the fire and the wood burned brightly, he recited, a bit more joyously, the second portion of the Penitential Prayers. When the fire was set he recited the third portion, and then he shut the stove.

The Litvak who saw all this became a disciple of the rabbi on the spot.

And ever after, when another disciple tells how the Rabbi of Nemirov ascends to heaven at the time of the Penitential Prayers, the Litvak no *longer* laughs. He only adds quietly, “If not higher. If not higher”.

Every time I read this story by the Yiddish writer Isaac Leib Peretz, it stirs something inside of me. It is such a beautiful narrative that speaks to the essence of what it means to be a compassionate and holy person. To me it reveals the true meaning of the significance of being made in the Divine Image, to have a soul given to us by God. The last line of the story, “If Not Higher,” always echoes in my mind, as I imagine the rabbi being transported to the upper echelons of heaven, even while somehow remaining inside the earthly shack of the elderly woman. In helping a fellow human being, he managed the miraculous task of fusing heaven and earth. This is the power of acting in a way that reflects ultimate holiness and true piety. The rabbi’s actions are meant to be a model and inspiration for us all.

Yet there is even more to this story than meets the eye. Indeed, the moral is surely that piety is defined by acting to reach out to those in need, but the message goes beyond this and has direct import for this holiday season. It is no coincidence, for example, that the rabbi disappeared to do these great acts of *gemilut hessed*, of loving kindness, on the eve of the High Holidays. And it is no coincidence that he did so *during* the penitential prayers themselves. And it is no coincidence that it was a Litvak, stereotypically a stickler for the precise rules of the sages, who discovered the true piety of the rabbi of Nemirov. Nothing in this story is coincidence; everything is symbolic.

The power of Hasidic stories is that the holy person or the holy action being trumpeted by the tale is often not who, or what, you would expect. These stories challenge you to shift firmly ingrained and broadly accepted paradigms and in so doing attempt to reveal a powerful spiritual truth. For example, many of you may be familiar with the following anecdote:

In a large town in Eastern Europe, during a Kol Nidre service when the entire Jewish community was assembled and the Torahs were all out on the bimah and everyone was dressed in glorious white kittels scrubbed clean in preparation for the holiday, a young dirty ignorant peasant boy entered the shul. And when it came time for the prayers to begin, so moved by the moment but utterly ignorant of Jewish ways, he began to mutter

loudly the only Hebrew he knew, “Aleph Bet! Aleph Bet! Aleph Bet!”. In disgust the congregation began to shush him, worried that his mutterings would ruin the holiness of the moment. Yet the rabbi quieted them all and said, “The prayer of this young boy is the holiest prayer of all because it was pure and straight from the heart”.

The hero was an unexpected character, an ignorant peasant child. The holy action, muttering the Aleph Bet on Kol Nidre night, was not the typical holy action. Through such a surprise and exaggeration, the lesson of the story becomes loud and clear: we should not attempt to fool ourselves with our own piety by merely dressing the part but we must strive try to reach down deep inside and pray with a pure heart.

In the case of “If Not Higher”, the message is about piety and holiness as well. The *typical* notion of holiness, as imagined by Peretz, is symbolized by heaven, the dwelling place of none other than God. Thus, when their devout rabbi was missing during the Penitential Prayers, the assumption of the townsfolk was that he was with God, in heaven, the holiest place *they* could imagine. However, this Hasidic tale reveals to us that heaven and holiness are not always what they seem to be. The Rabbi of Nemirov was indeed engaged in a sacred act, just as his disciples thought. Yet contrary to their imaginations, he did not have to leave this earth to do so. The holiest place, higher than the heavens, as the Litvak states, was not on another metaphysical plane. It was not in another world. In fact, it was in, of all places, a run-down shack in their own village. Holiness was not nearly as far away as they imagined!

This lesson is also famously taught in the Torah. In parshat *Nitzavim*, which we read the Shabbat before the High Holidays, only a few days ago, Moses tells the people that the Torah, our guide to holiness, is “*lo bashamiyim . . . v’ lo mever la yam . . .*” -- it is not in the heavens that you should say, ‘Who among us can go up to the heavens 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 the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?’ No the thing is very close to you in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it”. Holiness is not in a place unreachable, the Torah tells us, it is very much attainable in our world. We need go nowhere far to find it.

In fact, in the spirit of this teaching, according to Peretz, the holiness of a place is not even determined by its *location*. Rather the holiness that was created by the Rabbi of Nemirov was by virtue of what he was *doing* in that place! Thus, we learn that sacred space is often determined by what we do inside of it. Any place has the potential to be holy. The dwelling place of God is where we *make room* for God’s presence on earth. We, seemingly insignificant human beings, actually have the power to create heaven on earth *wherever* we are by virtue of how we behave.

Thus we learn that the primary spiritual goal of the Jew is not becoming so holy as individuals through participation in meditation and prayer that we somehow transport ourselves beyond this universe to a place far above the rest of humanity. We are not each merely on some *personal* journey toward great spiritual heights and private salvation. We do not attempt to separate our soul from its earthly form and ascend to heaven according

to one typical paradigm of spiritual elevation. Our goal, as Jews, is just the reverse -- to bring heaven down to earth.

Thus prayer, in Peretz's story, becomes transformed into a means of bringing holiness into the everyday lives of the entire community. The Torah tells us directly, "*Asu li mikdash vshachanti betocham*" – "Build Me a Sanctuary so I may Dwell in it *amongst you*". God wishes our worship and spiritual endeavors to create a place for God *here* on earth. Thus, prayer becomes not only a way to worship, but also a method to inspire our actions -- actions that reflect our goal of bringing holiness into the world. In Peretz's story, exaggerated to make a point, the rabbi's prayer was *simultaneous* to his actions, directly linked. It was embodied in his care for a community member at the time of her greatest need.

Therefore, the piety of the rabbi was exhibited not only in his dedication to the house of prayer and in his spiritual devotion to God, but also in the way he actualized his prayer and lived the values his prayers expressed. In performing *Tikkun Olam*, repairing the world and making it a better place, the Rabbi of Nemirov brought heaven down from above to the seemingly unlikely confines of the small shack in which the frail elderly woman lived. He may have actually traveled a small *physical* distance in completing his mission but through his actions he accomplished the great feat of bringing God into the everyday mortal world.

The rabbi of Nemirov teaches us, tonight, the eve of Rosh Hashanah, that the true goal of the penitential prayers and the penitential season, the method by which we achieve perfection and redemption, lies in what we *do* on this earth to actualize our prayers and alleviate the suffering in this world in the name of God. The story is not actually telling us to skip the penitential prayers to do this, the rabbi prayed *as* he carried out his deed of loving kindness. However, it is giving us a vision of how our prayers become enacted through the deeds that are inspired *by* them. When we seek atonement from God, and from fellow human beings, during the course of the holidays, our apologies should not only be about what we have done *wrong* but also about what we *failed* to do in the first place. Did we anticipate the needs of our loved ones? Did we reach out to those less fortunate? Did we take the time to study and pray and then turn those prayers and values into action? Did we take the idea that we are ALL created in God's image to heart?

Peretz is trying to help us understand that if the penitential season does not lead us to modify our actions, to improve ourselves for the benefit of others, then we have missed much of the point the High Holidays. I love that the penitential season inspires holiness in us. I love that people have time over these next ten days for introspection. I value greatly the important opportunity the High Holidays gives us to renew ourselves, to allow us to start over and to inspire us.

Yet, Peretz reminds us that it must also cause us to make sure that the New Year is meaningful and joyous for everyone *else* as well. The penitential season does not only put the individual Jew on his own personal spiritual journey to self-improvement but it is an opportunity for us to participate in the redemption of the *entire* community. For we are all

the Rabbi of Nemirov. And we are also all the peasant woman he helped. However, most of the time we are the Litvak, good people who have the potential to be inspired by the actions of another to become true partners with God in bringing holiness into the lives of every human being. May each of you have a year full of goodness and sweetness and may it be one in which our prayers inspire us to help bring heaven to more places on earth. Shanah Tovah!