

YK Sermon 2009/5770: Why Judaism Matters

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(Written for speaking purposes)

A thousand years from now when scientists have solved all of the questions that plague humanity, they are finally ready for the ultimate challenge. They elect a representative to address God. “God”, says the scientist in charge, “you are no longer needed. You served a function in your day, but that day is gone. We can do everything that you can do, so goodbye.” There is a moment of silence. Then a voice booms out of the sky, “Everything?” “Yes,” answers the scientist, “everything.” “Can you make a human being from dust?” “Absolutely.” “Ok”, says God, “Let me **see** you make a human being.” The scientist reaches down and digs his hands into the earth. “Oh, no,” says God. “Get your **own** dust!”

The story I just shared is certainly cute (and you have demonstrated that it was funny), however it is also extremely profound. It speaks to the transcendent wonder of the universe, the radical amazement we feel when contemplating the unfathomable

notion of creation and the beginnings of the world. The ability of the human being, to discover and to invent, is truly remarkable and it is tempting sometimes to believe in our ultimate power to know and to do. Yet, this story humorously points out that our wonderful human talents do not **contradict** the power of God in the universe; they do not make God disappear. God will always be along side us even as we progress and advance, rejoicing at our discoveries and hoping, that instead of creating distance between us, our progress will bring us ever closer to Him.

I share this story with you this today because Yom Kippur, as the Sabbath of Sabbaths, is the single most important day of the year and it is a day **defined** by images of God. It is a day during which we will each recite from our Mahzor, our High Holiday prayer book, page after page of praise and description of God. Yet, I know that there are many here who doubt, often or sometimes, in the existence of God. I know that there are even more of us who aren't sure what God really means to us. And I

would imagine that **all** of us have had moments when we can't decide **what** we believe.

Fortunately, in Judaism, doubt does not prevent us from being a good Jew. It does not even prevent us from being “religious”, a term I would like to explore shortly. Our tradition actually teaches us that doubt is something, which handled appropriately, can make our belief **stronger**, something that can **lead** to faith. For doubt creates questions, questions spur exploration and exploration leads to growth. The matter of our belief in God **deserves** deep thought and consideration; without questions and challenges our beliefs become flimsy and weak. The key is, to make sure that we question our **doubt** just as much as we question our belief. We must be careful to investigate responsibly and not simply be dismissive.

This may be more difficult in today's world than it has been in the past. There are a number of phenomena at work that could make one doubt the benevolence of religion or the existence of God. Whether it be because of religious strife that exists in Israel

or in other places around the world, or because of the suffering we see on such a large scale, due to the economy or another such crisis, we may be questioning religion's ability to be a positive force in the world and we may be wondering how God could exist and all of this could still take place. It hasn't helped either that in the last thirty years there have been many influential intellectuals who have once again attested to the "death of God" and who mock people who have any connection to religion as "ignorant", "foolish" and "weak". Who would want to be associated with something whose adherents are characterized in that way? The world as presented, has placed many barriers between us and religious belief and I fear that there are too many people, and more specifically for today, too many **Jews**, who have a disregard for the **religious** side of Judaism and who are willing to dismiss the notion of God's existence in the world almost out of hand. I believe in doing so, people are denying themselves and their communities, a great source of wisdom, joy and meaning. And it is my hope that

each of us, no matter where we stand, can continue to grow in their appreciation of **all** that Judaism has to offer.

Rabbi David Wolpe, a Conservative colleague, prolific author and a nationally renowned rabbi, wrote a book last year called *Why Faith Matters*. You may recall that he spoke here in a joint program with the Federation just this past spring. True to the title, the purpose of the book is to address our doubts about God and organized religion, to affirm the place that doubt and exploration have in true belief, to refute the challenges brought by the most recent critics of religion, and to give voice to the venerated and powerful perspective that God, faith and religion are, and always have, for a plethora of good reasons, been extremely important to both the world as a whole and to us as individuals.

Saddened that classic negative stereotypes of religious-minded people are being accepted by far too many, and in an effective attempt to debunk them, he first reminds us what being religious does **not** mean. To begin, faith in Judaism is **not** blind.

And commitment to Jewish tradition is **not** premised on ignorance. In fact quite the opposite is true. Similarly, being religious need **not** force one to choose between God and science. This is a false dichotomy; religious people can love and believe in both. Third, adhering to a religion does **not** make you narrow-minded and intolerant. We all know that there are some religious people who behave that way in the name of religion but the vast majority are decent people engaged in good works of all kinds. Finally, someone who chooses to be a person of faith does **not** do so primarily out of fear, but mostly out of love and a spiritual longing for connectedness.

Yes, Judaism, like anything else, can be distorted and used for negative purposes. It can, and has been used as an excuse to hate. However, when people use Judaism as such they are **straying** from Judaism's teachings, **violating** its principles. Their decision to do so says nothing about the truth of our religious belief or of its character. All things can be distorted. The reality is that like other major religions, Judaism originally came into

being out of a response to a sense of something **greater** than ourselves, something **beyond** the material world, what we call God, which compelled our ancestors to seek goodness and holiness in a purposeful way. We have to jettison the stereotypes that others have put forward so we can see the beauty, wisdom and meaning Judaism truly has to offer us.

Recognizing this fact -- that every human being has doubts about God -- and recognizing that many people have hesitations in referring to themselves as religious, for a whole host of reasons, in order to transcend these barriers, Wolpe proposes asking ourselves two intriguing questions to help determine if we are indeed “religious”. One, do you believe only in that which is tangible, something physically detectable, or do you believe there can be **intangible** reality? Two, do you believe that there is mystery at the heart of the universe that will never be solved or do you believe that with time everything about the universe can be known by human beings?

Before you answer for yourselves, let me explain. Regarding the first question, the issue he is addressing is the existence of things we cannot scientifically **prove** to be real. For example, is “understanding” real? Can you point to what is moving from my mouth into your brains? Is what I am saying simply a bunch of sound waves traveling through the air and vibrating in your ear, or something **more** than that? How about the experience of listening to music? Can it be utterly reduced to physiological elements? Where is love? Can we really locate it in our hearts? Can love be definitively and scientifically measured? As Rabbi Wolpe points out, it may be true that when we learn something new a scan might locate changes in our brain, but that change is **not** the idea itself. Believe it or not, we can even **map** the electrical currents of a brain when someone experiences an emotion but is that mapping really the same as the feeling? As Rabbi Wolpe wrote, “Who really believes that the idea of justice or the meaning of morality is nothing more than a chemical change in the prefrontal cortex?”

Life **cannot** be defined in scientific terms alone and truthfully I don't think many of us really believe that it can.

We all know from our lives that non-physical things are real. That the stuff of life goes beyond its material or scientific definition. Ideas, emotions, imagination, relationships and belief are all made up of intangibles that form the core of our lives. They are what give meaning **to** the tangible. Life, therefore, is lived in a world with broader horizons, filled with indescribable amazements, beauty, and wonder that speak to our soul as well as to our brain. If we see the world in this way, we see the world the way Judaism sees the world, and by doing so, in a sense, we become religious.

The second, and related, question he asks, addresses our ability to know and understand the universe. To illustrate the issue I will quote a witty anecdote found in Wolpe's book authored by noted **physicist** Robert Jastrow who said, "For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of **reason alone**, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is

about to conquer the highest peak [from where he can see it all]; as he pulls himself over the final rock . . . he is greeted by a band of **theologians** who have been sitting there for **centuries**". In essence this story illustrates the fact that science, of course, has many truths to teach us, but according to Jewish philosophy the ultimate truths of the universe will never be definitively known in their entirety. There is no one final peak, no one last rock to climb. There will always be another.

And further this story illustrates that the truths **scientists** seek, are the precise truths that our sages and rabbis have been seeking as well for the past millennia. We can see that scientific enterprise and religious investigation are really directed towards the same purpose, each in their own way – to uncover the beautiful intricate mysteries of the universe. Many of our greatest sages were also students of the natural world and have seen in the study of nature one important way to seek God. According to our teachings, God can be found in the complicated structure of human DNA, the splendor of a gorgeous sunset and the magnificence of

the birth of a child. Since the natural world was created by God, its workings only **confirm** God's existence. Spirituality and science are two sides of the same coin.

However, the religious seeker recognizes that the full truth, the complete picture, by definition is impossible for a human to uncover and, therefore, he **marvels** at the awesomeness of such a mystery. From a religious perspective, the power of the **seeking** is **not** therefore solely tied up in reaching the final destination but rather is found in the journey itself. Seen from this angle being religious is more a perspective than anything else. One can easily be a scientist and be religious. Such a person understands as renowned scientist Stephen Jay Gould stated, "that science is a limited domain." Wolpe cites many scientists in his book who agree with this wholeheartedly. They readily admit that ultimate discovery can never take place; that God is endless and the reach of science, while lengthy, only goes so far. As Einstein said, the more I learn of science the more I believe in God. Each discovery leads to more questions, in a cycle that never ends.

In that sense (using Wolpe's analogy) we are all like people blindfolded, feeling out the world with our limited ability to sense and know. Some believe the blindfold can simply be removed, while those with a sense of the wonder of God and an appreciation for the idea of eternity, know that the blindfold is actually our limited human capacity for understanding. It **can never** be removed. Our limitations are a part and parcel of being a finite human being.

Yet, from a religious perspective we see this limit as its own blessing. Through it we have been given the ability to perceive the unseen, to make meaning out of the intangible, which are gifts in and of themselves. To know everything would destroy discovery, creativity and amazement. To have the **power** to be all-knowing would make us God. According to Jewish thought, our unique ability as human beings, an ability that even **God** does not possess, is to **choose** to be like God – to **choose** goodness and holiness. God is by definition God; **we** have been given the choice. Our free-will, our ability to choose, actually defines our purpose in life.

The Torah is full of commandments demanding over and over that we choose holiness, goodness, blessing and life instead of irreverence, evil, curse and death. One need not demand if there is no other option to follow. The choice really **is** ours. And it is precisely our ability to choose evil that allows us the opportunity to choose good. Therefore, the limitations we have are necessary in order to receive God's gift of free will. While they may prevent us from achieving total understanding, without them we would be robots, the course of our existence pre-determined. Conscious choice is what makes us holy even while it allows for evil in the world. Far from hindering us as human beings, ironically in this case, limitation permits free will, one of the most **empowering** characteristics of life.

One choice we make with our free will on an on-going basis is how to view the world. As Albert Einstein wrote, "There are two ways to see the world: as if **everything** is a miracle or as if **nothing** is a miracle". One of the gifts of a religious outlook is the opportunity to appreciate how truly amazing our world is. It

allows us to see the fullness of meaning in that with which we interact daily. Being aware that there is more than meets the eye, for example, helps us not to confuse what a thing is made of, with what it actually **is** and what it means to **us**. A Torah, for example, is made up of just parchment and ink, but is that really what it is or what it means to us? The significance of something clearly far outstrips its physical description or scientific definition.

Acknowledging the power of that intangible meaning is part of spirituality. It is a part of sensing God. It is what Einstein meant when he spoke of seeing everything in the world as a miracle.

Sensing God and the miraculous requires an active and seeking mind and soul. One of the great things about Judaism is that it is a religion of questions, nothing is taboo; **everything** can be explored. Far from being a belief system for the simple-minded, we Jews have always, if anything, made things more complicated and rarely settle for a simple explanation. You know the old joke, three Jews, four opinions. And when you ask a rabbi a question, is it ever a simple answer? Therefore, participating in

Judaism does **not** mean leaving your inquiring mind behind. Just the opposite, Judaism demands that you bring **all** of your heart, mind and soul to bear when encountering life, Torah, our tradition and God.

However, possibly even more important than that, we must remember that Judaism's power also lies in the **kind** of questions it asks and demands that we ask of ourselves. We naturally live our lives in our own everyday worlds. During a particular day we get asked, and ask ourselves, a million questions: What should I wear? What should I eat? Would you like sugar with that? Are you available next Tuesday at 3? And on and on. All of these are important questions in their own way. Yet, in what context are you ever asked questions like, why do you exist? What are you supposed to do with your time on this earth? Which values should inform your decisions? What, if anything, is worth dying for? Is there an afterlife? These are the questions that challenge us **not only to exist in this world but to live it with purpose**. These are the questions that help us to embrace life as a journey full of

meaning and wonder, instead of as something to endure as comfortably as possible. These are the type of questions that try to establish meaning and improve the quality of our lives, to take them to a different level of what we call *kedushah* - holiness.

And this activity never stops. Throughout the year and during the course of our lives, each holiday, each ritual, each life-cycle event has a meaning behind it that addresses an important question and that symbolizes a particular set of responses. That is why each holiday has a theme, whether it be the self-improvement /self-reflection theme of today or the theme of freedom which is discussed on Passover, our holidays allow us to focus on an important value at different points in our year and address its meaning in our lives. And **ritual** is where our values are enacted; they are made tangible through symbols, like Hanukkah candles or apples and honey. And each ritual and custom we perform has a meaning attached to it geared to help us contemplate the values such symbols and customs represent, in order to help guide us toward purposeful and sacred living. Judaism, like many religions,

asks the ultimate and important questions, questions that we are not often asked in other arenas of our lives, and then it gives us a framework for addressing the answers to these questions, helping us to determine how we actually should **live** our lives, through the aid of Torah, law, custom, ritual and learning.

Today is the perfect example. On Yom Kippur we ask ourselves the most basic questions: Who are we? What are we doing with our lives? How can we be better? What does “better” mean? If it was not for Yom Kippur, would you be considering such questions? Maybe, maybe not. Yet, Judaism, expressed in law, **demand**s that we address the core issues of life. Doing so is the only way to achieve our ultimate potential, the only way to live life with fullness of meaning. The questions may not lead to answers right away, they may not lead us straight to God, but they prime us, so that when we are ready, we will be able to feel the presence of God and experience the spiritual growth we are looking for. More than that, Judaism provides wisdom, culture, texts, symbols and customs to nurture our soul, which recognizes

our desire to search, our need to connect and our urge to live meaningfully. And it allows us to do all of this with our full being: mind, body **and** soul.

Please understand that no one is claiming that spiritual growth comes automatically or immediately with religious practice. Engaging in religious behaviors, accepting a religious point of view, does not magically transform one into someone who is radically amazed by every moment of life. As you well know, people who take religion and spirituality seriously, still get annoyed when they spill coffee on their pants or lock their keys in their car. Just ask my wife.

However, to experience transcendence you must be open to it. While you cannot force it, you must be prepared for it to happen. Wolpe writes, “As with all of life, the noblest spots of time are when we are prepared for the marvels that [surely] await us”.

Yet, we may ask, where do such marvels come from? What enables the meaning, amazement and wonder I keep speaking

about? In Judaism, the answers to these questions are all linked to God. However, I understand that often Jews prefer not to talk about God. I have come to believe, through innumerable conversations on the subject, that this is primarily because our understanding of the nature of God still comes from our childhood notions of divinity. Many people still see God as some third party human-like figure, sometimes pictured as man with a white beard, who, like a human king, rules over our earth. If this is what people picture as God, it is easy for me to understand why so many people are unwilling to say they believe.

However, a belief in God need not, and frankly **should** not, mean believing in the bearded man on high. In Judaism, God is often referred to as the *ein sof*, literally “that which has no end”. According to this perspective, God is eternity, infinity, everything and everywhere. God is that which is beyond us, what links all creations to each other. God is the power to find meaning beyond existence. God is the closeness we feel to another. God is the altruistic spirit inside of us that causes us to care about others,

even those who have **no** personal connection to us, in a way that does not directly benefit us, in a way that evolutionary theory cannot explain. God is the structure and movement of the Universe. God is our Shepherd, our Judge, the Lord of Hosts, our Redeemer, and countless other aspects of life. God is both personal and transcendent. God is the unity of the universe. Therefore, God is complicated and by definition, beyond our complete comprehension. However **life** is complicated and often times beyond our comprehension as well, would we expect God, the **creator** of life, to be less?

God, as creator, has a role in everything that exists. That is why in Judaism, acts of loving kindness to other human beings, *mitzvot ben adam l'havero*, are God given commandments just as much as the ritual ones, *mitavot ben adam l'makom*. God is found, both in the overtly religious and as well as in our daily human relations, which we can learn to see as religious as well. That is why our Torah has commandments for how we conduct business, how we handle sickness, how we treat animals, how we deal with

every subject that a human will encounter, for everything we do is connected to God, everything we do is significant, everything we do can lead to holiness and goodness. Everything is a miracle. Through the eyes of Judaism and a belief in God, the world is place full of wonder, beauty, goodness and meaning. It is the way the world is intended to be seen.

And Judaism is not only a positive force in an abstract theological sense; commitment to Judaism has a very practical upside. In fact, on the whole, Wolpe demonstrates that statistics indicate that participating in organized religion is both good for the individual and good for the world. I won't bore you with all of the studies, as there are many, but here are a few facts. A study of Harvard students published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry* reported that students who became more involved in organized religion while at school, quote, "demonstrated a marked improvement in ego functioning . . . [a] halt in the use of drugs, alcohol and cigarettes, improved impulse control . . . improved academic performance, enhanced self-image, an increased capacity

for . . . satisfying relationships . . . [and] a positive change in affect”. Not a bad list.

In addition, a Wall Street Journal-published-study reported that people affiliated with organized religion were twice as likely to say they were happy and were a third more likely to be optimistic about the future. Finally, in 2000, a study was published that indicated that religious people have lower blood pressure and live longer. And in particular it was regular attendance at services that was cited as the biggest single factor. (Anyone want to come to services this Shabbat?) As Dr. Harold Koenig of Duke University wrote, “The benefits of . . . involvement in a faith community and religious commitment, are that people cope better. In general they cope with stress better, they experience greater well-being because they have more hope . . . they experience less depression, less anxiety . . . they have healthier life-styles. They have stronger immune systems, lower blood pressure . . . and they live longer”. As Dr. Linda George, a researcher involved in the studies wrote, “Most importantly [these studies] have taught me

that quality of life is at least as much a function of what we **believe** as what we have”. Belief may not **be** tangible but it certainly seems to have tangible **effects**.

And religious affiliation and belief were also demonstrably beneficial to the **greater** community as well. Marriages for people who frequently attended services were 2.4 times less likely to end in divorce. Men who attended services often, were 50% less likely to commit acts of violence to their spouses. It has been documented as well that religious individuals are 40% more likely to give to charity and donate 70% **more** than their non-religious counterparts. In addition, they are more than twice as likely to volunteer their time and 10% more likely to vote.

None of these statistics are cited to show that being religious guarantees **anything**. **Any** set of individuals can defy these statistics in either direction. However, it is clear that, on balance, even from an objective point of view, religion is not only spiritually compelling in a theological sense, but is actually beneficial to you and to the world in concrete ways as well. As

Rabbi Wolpe puts it, “[These statistics] . . . remind us . . . that we are creatures designed to flourish – to heal and to help – [especially] when we believe”.

In 21st century America, life is full of choices. Judaism teaches us that our choices matter, the decisions we make are crucial in determining the value of our lives and the condition of the world. Our tradition, our customs and our belief in God are all here to support that goal, “to push us to be better, to give more of ourselves, to see glimmers of transcendence scattered throughout our lives”. Wolpe calls our religious tradition, both an achievement and a gift. It is “an achievement of seeking, questioning, yearning, reasoning and hoping and it is a gift of God, who fashioned this world, whose goodness sustains it and whose teachings could save it, if only we would listen and love”. Judaism is a remarkable gift each of us has been given. It is a religion, a tradition and a way of life that speaks to intelligent people with complicated lives about how to seek the holy and the sacred, the good and the benevolent, with purpose and with meaning. The

question is not **whether** God exists, but, whether we decide to bring God into our lives. The question is not **whether** Judaism has something to add to our lives, the question is will we let it. So, take a new class, come to services more often, adopt a ritual you have not yet observed, read a Jewish book, incorporate a new Jewish law into your life and ask yourself important Jewish questions. Many of these things can be done through our synagogue. Although, however you do it, allow our tradition to enhance your lives. See it is a gift. Therefore my hope is for all of us that this be a year of spiritual growth, that we continue to appreciate the gift of our Jewish tradition that both God and our ancestors have given us and that we continue to seek meaning in our lives using Torah and Jewish values to guide us on our path.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah – May we all be inscribed for a healthy, happy and meaningful year. Amen.

*Thank you to Rabbi David Wolpe for his book, *Why Faith Matters*, that served as an inspiration for this sermon.