

ROSH HASHANAH II
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Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav taught that unworthy religious teachings bring unbelief and enmity to religion. Believing in nonsense is just that—nonsense. Studies have shown that human beings have a capacity for believing ridiculous things even when scientific facts collide with their beliefs. Take Creationism as but one example and how scientists who are fundamentalists hang up their critical thinking along with their lab coats when they go home. There are many people who deny widely accepted scientific findings if they contradict their religious views.

To believe in religious metaphor or symbolism is one thing; to believe literally, for example, that the Torah, the entire Bible, Talmud and all subsequent rabbinic literature were dictated to Moses word for word on Mt. Sinai is another. The anthropologist Karen Armstrong points out that myths are created to convey truths and meaning that literal texts cannot convey. For example, in the Genesis narrative G-d creates all humanity from one couple, Adam and Eve, which promotes the humanistic value that we all belong to one human family and everyone's ancestry is equal.

Knowing what we do not believe can be as important as knowing what we do believe. Knowing we do not believe that everything that happens in our lives and world is for the good can help us understand why bad things happen to good people. Not believing in a physical heaven up there can help us find awe, wonder and mystery in our world down here. Many people look for supernatural miracles missing the miracles of the sun rising and setting and our diaphragms contracting and expanding.

We are to believe in a world of higher consciousness and in the possibility to infuse our physical lives with spiritual meaning. We do not need a G-d Who gives us brains and minds and then requires us not to use them to prove our faith. This is not to say that all of reality can be proven in the laboratory or that there are no mysteries, marvels and exciting unknowns yet to be discovered. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches that we need to regularly experience radical amazement in our lives by, for example, observing how a plant grows and bears fruit, thinking about light traveling at 186,000 per second and looking into the eyes of a newborn baby.

For Jews, spiritual experiences can be facilitated through mitzvot provided we engage in mitzvot with mindfulness as compared to doing them mechanically and/or out of concern for reward or punishment. Approaching prayer in the right way can lead to encounters with our deeper and essential selves. The author Barbara Ehrenreich says that she regularly has what she calls a "rationalist's mystical moment" when she experiences not being alone in the universe. Judaism affirms we are part of something larger than us and that we can experience the transcendent. As Jews "we are to keep our feet on the ground as our heads reach up to the heavens."

The Kabbalists teach that the only way to experience *devekut*, connecting to G-d, is to get beyond our egos, *bittul yesh*, the nullifying of our temporal identities. Our egos are not our ultimate and essential selves. Our egos are our physical and corporeal selves, our appetites and desires, our fears, insecurities and self-centeredness. Our egos prevent us from experiencing being part of something bigger than ourselves. Transcending our egos can be for many a frightening and threatening proposition. Dr. Viktor Frankl taught that self-transcendence—extending our existence beyond our individual selves—represents the unique human ability to rise above oneself and serve a higher purpose. The more we do this, the more human we become. Rambam taught that true happiness only comes from reaching outside ourselves; he says this can be accomplished simply by inviting unfortunate people to our tables. Transcending our egos makes us more, not less.

The Mezeritzer Rebbe taught that every human being needs to believe that G-d's presence is within him or her. This is the true source of self-esteem as compared to the superficial and empty pursuits of success our culture promotes. I wonder when I hear parents and others speak about success what they are talking about? Is success being a compassionate and honest individual who pursues peace and justice? Is success being an individual who brings comfort, encouragement and hope to another human being? Is success being an individual who is humble and sensitive, who worries about the future of our world? Is success being a *mentsh*? True religion answers yes to all of these.

Prayer can assist us in feeling we are part of something bigger than us, sensing G-d within us and internalizing ethical values. Most of us relate to prayer as only taking place in the synagogue. Prayer can include meditation, self-reflection, exercises in stillness and quiet and even privately talking out loud to G-d; prayer has never been intended to be confined to synagogues. Very few of us have a daily prayer life and even fewer of our children do. Once the Baal Shem Tov refused to go into the synagogue on Rosh HaShanah and stood outside. When everyone was leaving they asked him why and he responded: "There is no room in the synagogue for me because it is filled with all of your prayers that you are leaving here instead of taking them with you." One reason prayer is meaningless and/or difficult for us is because it is a non-sequitur in our lives; it is hard to pray in synagogue if we don't pray when we are not here.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, an Orthodox rabbi and the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, wrote that "religion is getting in the way of serving G-d. Too much religious living precludes us from having evolving theologies; too many of us believe today what we believed when we were children." Rabbi Sacks says: "We cannot believe, for example, when we are 50 what we believed when we were 15." He points out that if there is to be a future for humankind, religious faith traditions have to be reconstructed and brought into the post-modern era. He tells us that too many so called religious people create G-d in their image instead of letting G-d create us in G-d's image and this is the main reason so much evil is done in the name of G-d. Having a theology that leads to religious discrimination, persecution and violence in the name of G-d contributes significantly to the denigration and demise of humanity and our world.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro teaches that one thing that can bring true people of faith together is our acknowledging that no one knows for sure what G-d wants. We can refer to our faith traditions to assert with certainty what G-d does not want: G-d never wants us to promote or justify hatred and violence in G-d's name. We can be united in working for justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with each other. Such religious behavior can bring people together as compared to religious chauvinism and supercessionism, the claim that "my religion is the right and superior religion" which divides and distances people from one another. This includes the supercessionism within Judaism where there are those who claim they are the Torah true Jews and the rest of us are imposters; we are Jews but the religion we practice is not Judaism.

In recent years more rabbis and theologians are teaching process theology—a belief system that remains dynamic and evolving not frozen in time: not from thousands of years ago or from our childhood. We are accepting that there is not an omnipotent G-d, an all-powerful G-d that can do anything and affirming that we can live without an omnipotent G-d but we cannot live without an all compassionate G-d. An omnipotent G-d that would let the Holocaust happen cannot be a compassionate G-d. But a compassionate G-d that is not all powerful can be with us in our hurt, pain and sadness and give us strength and hope.

We should always be asking ourselves is this what G-d wants of me? As Jews, we have commandments, laws and customs to guide us in answering this question. Religious living is an inherently unstable construction and we must remember to be humble and not self-righteous in answering this question. Rabbi Elyse Goldstein reminds us that much of the time we look for G-d in the wrong places. We conjure up a G-d who is a man with a big beard, a G-d who threatens us with punishments and entices us with rewards, a G-d who works miracles and is absolutely just even though bad things happen to good people.

Speaking of that, someone when asked why bad things happen to good people responded: "I don't even know why hot dogs are packed ten to a package and hot dog buns eight to a package and you want me to explain why bad things happen to good people!" Rabbi Bradley Shavit-Artson teaches that human suffering brings us into relationship with G-d to experience a G-d of compassion which then brings us into relationship with each other. We can bring compassion to each other because we are created in G-d's image. Our suffering and pain may not go away but we can know that we are not alone. This is why being with mourners at funerals and at shiva is so important—it brings forth our compassion without which we cannot endure.

This is why G-d is a G-d of compassion and not a G-d of omnipotence; this is why we can live without an all powerful G-d but not without an all compassionate G-d. This is why in many prayers and writings about death, we envision G-d as a loving Friend Who will bathe us in light and love. We, who are created in G-d's image, can bring compassion, concern, and caring into the world because this is what G-d does. Arnold Eisen, Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, reminds us: "In this real world real good and evil, actual life and death,

are frequently in our hands” and we are to believe that G-d commands us to choose every day goodness and life.”

Judy Montagu, an Israel columnist, wrote: “The sense that there’s nothing wondrous left to experience is tragic.” She says that our overuse of the word “awesome” makes it not surprising that that most of us have lost the ability to feel genuine awe. “Too many,” she writes, “feel as if we have seen it all.” She sees a miracle in everyday life and also in the survival of the Jewish people after centuries of persecution, the Shoah and in the rebirth of Israel. This is a very strong belief system that is not built on nonsense or miracles.

What do we believe we owe to the future of our world; for what are we responsible? Not just to our children and grandchildren but to generations beyond? What do we believe about the commandment in Genesis to be guardians and stewards of this earth? How do our lives and life styles match up with this commandment and what we say we believe? How many of us contemplate eternity and infinity experiencing the awesomeness of being alive and the mystery of the Universe? How many of us do so resulting in a deeper sense of responsibility to live our lives accordingly? Rabbi Heschel’s radical amazement is not mystical poetry; it is a call to action.

Think of the explosion of two neutron stars that are 3.9 billion light years away—one light year being about 5.9 trillion years. Think of seeing light from stars that died billions of light years ago. Radical amazement and the thankfulness and humility it gives birth to are essential to any true religious-spiritual life. There can be no true religious-spiritual life that is not rooted in a commitment to contribute to the future by fulfilling the mitzvah of being guardians and stewards of this planet. Environmentalism goes back to our Torah; for Jews it is not a contemporary issue by any approximation.

For me, a watershed theological moment came when I was in sixth grade at a Jewish day school. We just returned from a field trip to the natural history museum and I asked my Jewish studies teacher how is it possible that the world is only 5720 years old when we just saw fossils millions of years old? The rabbi responded: “Fossils were put on earth by G-d to test our faith in Him. This answer freed me—though I did not realize it then—to create a more meaningful Jewish theology. We do not need a G-d who will require us to throw out our critical, rational and intellectual thinking that this same G-d created within us to test whether we are faithful or not.

If you were asked why you are proud to be a Jew, what is it about Judaism that is so important and wonderful, what would you say? Would you point to our commitments based on our commandments and laws to be guardians and stewards of this earth, to love all human beings like ourselves, to pursue justice and peace, to provide for all those in need, not to take vengeance or hate another in our heart, to have just courts and just weights and measures in our market places, to ask for forgiveness and grant forgiveness, that we are never to give up on the future and that we are responsible to do *tikkun Olam*?

Can we all agree that these would make for a most meaningful and helpful theology as to what we believe G-d wants of us? If we add our beliefs that G-d never wants us to harm anyone and certainly not kill anyone in G-d's name, we have a significant and sophisticated theology not based on nonsense and miracles but derived and developed thoughtfully and wisely incorporating humility, compassion and hope. One cannot be religious or spiritual if what one believes does not respect the sanctity of all life and does not acknowledge that everyone is created equally in G-d's image. Any other belief, in my opinion, is idolatry be it the belief of a Jew or anyone else.

Let us praise G-d Who commands us to choose life and goodness. May we be blessed to do so enraptured by the miracle of life every day and the mysteries and wonders that fill our lives. When we pray may we never feel like we are talking to a wall but always feel that we are embracing a G-d of compassion and love. May we serve G-d with all hearts, with all our souls and with all our might.

SHANAH TOVAH.