

GIVING GOD THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

Rosh HaShanah 2015

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Good morning, good yomtov and a good New Year to us all.

If we are going to be serious about today's service and not just show up and wait for it to be over, there is a question we need to ask ourselves before we can recite any of the Rosh Hashanah prayers. The question is: Can we honestly look at this world and say "this is God's world?" Can we listen to the news every morning and so much of it is bad – war in one place, senseless violence in another – and come to shul on Rosh Hashanah, open our prayerbooks and recite a hundred or more times, "Praised are You, O Lord our God, Sovereign of the Universe..." Or are we just going through the motions, pretending we mean those words so that we can go home after the service and say to ourselves "I'm glad that's over for another year?" How can we affirm the sovereignty of God in this world without having to ignore all the terrible things that are wrong with it? Is there an alternative to believing either that God wants all these things to happen or that He is powerless to prevent them?

Earlier this year, I was trying to finish my most recent book and I wanted to say something taking note of the new tendency to speak of the United States, no longer as a Judeo-Christian nation (it took us long enough to get to that

point) but as “the heirs of the Abrahamic tradition,” recognizing Muslims as well as Jews and Christians as having a religious presence here.

To get a sense of what the “Abrahamic tradition” was all about, I consulted a recent book Inventing Abraham by a biblical scholar whom I think a lot of, Professor Jon Levenson of Harvard. He suggests that Jews, Christians and Muslims all hark back to Genesis to base themselves on God’s promise to Abraham, but each of those faiths, when they read Genesis, finds a different Abraham there. Christians look to Abraham as an example of belief in God, theological correctness. Abraham taught that God is God and all other gods are false. So to be a Christian means to believe in God to the exclusion of any other deity.

For Muslims, Abraham is the paragon of obedience. The story we read on Rosh HaShanah is more prominent in Muslim theology than in Judaism. God tells Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son (Isaac in the Jewish version, Ishmael in the Quran), and Abraham unhesitatingly agrees to do it. So to be a good Muslim is to obey. The name Islam means “surrender, obedience.” When Ramadan, the season of fasting, comes in June, as it did this year, whoever you are, even professional athletes and investment bankers, you fast every day from 5:00 in the morning until 8:30 at night.

Jews see Abraham primarily not as a denier of idolatry, not as a paragon of obedience. We see him as an ancestor, the founder of a people that will play a special role in God's plan for humanity. What are God's first words to Abraham in the Torah? "I will make of you a great nation...and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

I knew even before reading Levenson that Judaism, Christianity and Islam all traced their inspiration back to Abraham, but what I did not know until Levenson pointed it out was that all three base themselves on the same verse in Genesis; they just interpret it differently.

The verse is Genesis 15:6. The Hebrew reads *v'hu he'emin badonai*, Abraham did something to demonstrate his faith in God and God credited it to him as an act of faith. But what was it he did? The Hebrew is maddeningly ambiguous, though it seems to have something to do with believing.

Christianity sees it as affirming that God is real and denies all other pretenders to divinity. The essence of Christian faith thus becomes a matter of believing that God exists, and living your life differently in the light of that belief. To them, that's what that verse means.

For Islam, to believe in God doesn't mean affirming His existence. It means recognizing and accepting God's authority, God's right to tell you how to run your life.

Jewish translations, especially the more recent ones, tend to use the word "trust." Abraham trusted God. He trusted God to keep His promise to make him the ancestor of a great nation that would teach the world about God.

I read that sentence about how Jewish translators and commentators render that key verb as "Abraham trusted God," and I remember thinking to myself "that's it! That's the first interpretation I've ever read that makes sense of the story we read on Rosh Hashanah, God commanding Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice and Abraham ostensibly being willing to do so. Why was Abraham prepared to go ahead with such a horrible request? Because he trusted God to keep His promise to make Isaac the ancestor of a great nation. Abraham relied on God to intervene at the last moment and call off the sacrifice so that God's prediction about Isaac could be fulfilled. And that of course is precisely what happened.

Abraham was like the trapeze artist who has to trust completely in her partner. If she ever took her mind off what she was doing for one second to check that her partner was doing his part correctly, she would fall to her death.

That's what it means for a Jew to have faith in God despite everything that is wrong with the world. Faith in God doesn't mean the certainty that God exists, and it doesn't mean that we have to accept everything that happens as God's will. Faith in God means giving God the benefit of the doubt. It demands of us what I call a "theology of not-yet." Yes, there are problems in the world, -- war and crime and selfishness and racial and religious hatred. They exist, not because God wants them to be there and not because God is powerless to stop them, but because God's wishes for the world have yet to be played out over time. God's powers of goodness and justice have to be channeled into human action. God doesn't change things to make the world better. People change things because God inspires them to, and people haven't gotten that message yet. In a theology of not-yet, to have faith in God means to believe that what should be, one day will be, and if it hasn't happened yet, the fault is not with God. It's with human beings for not realizing that it's up to us to make it happen.

Had you been living in Spain in the 15th Century, at a time when Spain was the most powerful nation in Europe, you would have had to deal with the Inquisition as an expression of religious and political authority, with people being executed, burned at the stake for "wrong belief." And you might well

have asked yourself, Is this what religion stands for? Torture and death threats? Isn't religion supposed to be about cultivating the divine attributes of kindness and reverence for life? And the answer would have been, Yes, absolutely, but people haven't come to understand that yet. In time, people will come to recognize that forced religion can never be genuine religion, but it will take time for people to grow up and understand that. The human mind evolved slowly until it outgrew its approval of torturing people in the name of God. Even today, we see crimes committed in the name of religion by people who have not yet come to understand that their behavior is the very opposite of genuine religion.

Will they ever learn? Will the jihadis one day realize that what they do in the name of Allah desecrates the name of Allah? Will racial and religious bigots who go to church every Sunday one day open their eyes and understand that what they do is not only a crime but a sin against God? I absolutely believe that they will. My affirmation of a theology of not-yet assures me that one day they will, and I look forward to that day.

Had you been living in Europe in one of the countries occupied by the Nazis in the 1940's, and had to witness the murders, the torture, the concentration camps and violations of the most basic norms of human behavior,

you might well have wondered “For how long is the civilized world going to tolerate this kind of behavior? Does might make right? Does it give people the right to do such things to each other?” Ultimately the civilized world woke up to enormity of the Nazi threat, assembling the mightiest military effort the world had ever seen to defeat Hitler. But before they came to understand the need for that, millions of innocent people suffered and died. In 1939, people *did not yet* recognize the enormity of Hitler’s evil. By 1942, they were mobilized to put an end to it.

I was born in 1935. When I was growing up, my parents lived in daily dread of the childhood diseases that threatened to affect my life and health, -- mumps, measles, chickenpox, polio, and I am sure they were not the only ones who asked “What kind of God would permit this to happen to innocent children in His world?” But my generation saw medical researchers refuse to accept the idea that those plagues had to be part of life just because they had been part of life for as long as anyone could remember, and one by one, we learned to treat, and then to prevent, those ailments. That is what a theology of not-yet means, the refusal to see what is wrong with the world as reflecting God’s will and the recognition that human action is required to do something about it.

During the years when I was a pulpit rabbi here at Temple Israel, I had a good idea of what could go wrong in God's world. I would visit people in hospitals. I would officiate at funerals. I would hold the hands of grieving widows, grieving sons and daughters. For personal as well as professional reasons, I had an idea of how much undeserved pain and anguish there was in God's world. And there were days, more than one or two, when I would ask myself "Can I plausibly tell people that this is the world God had in mind when He created it?" The best answer I could come up with was, "Not yet."

Today literacy is virtually universal. Today education is widely available. Today medicine can do remarkable things, up to and including prosthetics and implants. People are living longer, and they are not spending those additional years in hospitals or in doctors' waiting rooms, as we once feared they might. Not long ago, I was invited to speak to a gathering of nonagenarians at a nearby senior living center. You had to be at least ninety years old to be part of the group and I was delighted to see a member of Temple Israel in the group. There were about a hundred people in the audience, and when I finished speaking, they asked some very perceptive questions. Once upon a time, not that long ago, the wish that a child would grow up into his or her nineties would have sounded like a fantasy, if not an outright curse, a prediction of years of feeble

confinement. But the attitude of “that’s just not possible” has evolved into an attitude of “not yet” and then into a common reality.

My friend, God’s gift to Abraham was the promise that his descendants would change the world, that they would teach humanity what it means to live every day in the presence of God, and we’ve done that. Abraham’s reciprocal gift to God was that he believed Him and worked to make it happen. In spite of everything that argued to the contrary 3,000 years ago, Abraham gave God the benefit of the doubt. That is what I take that verse in Genesis to mean.

Abraham’s faith in God was the faith that what should be, one day will be.

And because we, Abraham’s descendants, were willing to assume an attitude of “not yet” rather than “not possible,” we made a lot of that happen and we continue to work to bring the rest of it into reality. The world is still not the world God intended it to be. Some humans have made it significantly better, while others have made it worse. But to believe in God, to come to synagogue on Rosh haShanah to affirm that faith, means to believe that we have the God-given power to make that which should be into a reality, and we make God real in this world as we do so.

Shanah Tovah.