

God is in the Fire -- Rosh Hashanah 5767 (2006)

A study was done this year of weekly worship attendance in American. It turns out, that of all religious groups in this country, we Jews actually rank dead last. It appears that we rank behind Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians, who range around 45% regular worship attendance. We rank behind Episcopalians, who came in last among all the Christian denominations, at 32% regular attendance. That's right, with 15% regular service attendance, we Jews can claim that we're ahead of only one group – and that is the atheists!

Now, in our defense, the one point I would argue is that worship attendance is not the only measure of Jewish involvement. Our Temple Solel building is overflowing with all kinds of activities nearly every day of the week. It's just that faith in God, which is at the heart of worship, is very challenging for most of us.

And maybe, in this way, we Jews are different from Christian groups. Faith doesn't come so easily to us. In fact, many of us look at our Christian friends who seem to have this very complete and serene faith, and wish we could achieve something like that.

I've seen a lot of us wrestle with faith. During serious illness, we are very ready to add prayer to our arsenal of healing remedies. I've visited many a patient in the hospital who told me the priest also stopped by for a prayer. Their bases are covered, they would say. All my Christian friends are praying me, too.

I have witnessed many times over that old adage – there are no atheists in foxholes. When tragedy strikes, we suddenly become very religious very quickly. But, I have also witnessed what happens when the tragedy recedes. So does the prayer. Those who came regularly to services during crisis, fade away when the crisis ends.

This, by the way, is not at all a criticism. It's just an observation from the bima – and probably a very old one, at that. Let's face it, from our earliest history, we have struggled with God. In fact, our biblical name says it all – Yisrael, wrestlers with God.

Yet, here we are, on this Rosh Hashanah, sitting in shul, uttering words that may have some level of meaning for us. Repentance, yes. Community, yes. Creating a better year than the last one, yes. But, faith in God? I guess for our faithful 15% the answer may be yes, but for the other 85% of us, let's be honest. We're Yisrael – at best, God wrestlers.

All of this raises one basic question: what does it mean for a Jew to have faith? On Rosh Hashanah, this is the very question our Torah reading throws at us, as God puts Abraham's faith to a test.

And what was the nature of that test? It was actually something utterly unthinkable to you and me. *V'ha-aleyhu sham l'olah* – and bring your son Isaac up the mountain as a sacrifice. We who have handed our children over to the Nazis to be murdered; we who have given sons over to battle in Israel's wars – we know too well the horror of this gruesome trial.

As we try to imagine such a traumatic scene, we ask, what kind of God makes this demand of a father? And, perhaps even worse, what kind of father would actually obey it? If this is faith, then honestly most of us here would rather choose unbelief!

The great Chassidic master, the Gerer Rebbe, was so disturbed by this portion of the Torah, he actually argued that Abraham failed the test! In order to save Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham protested to the hilt with God. But, when it came to his own innocent son, Isaac – not a word. Said the Gerer Rebbe, Abraham failed the test because he was silent.

Is faith blind, unthinking obedience, asks the Gerer Rebbe? Are we supposed to quietly surrender ourselves to God's will, just because we think it is God's will and, therefore, who are we to question it?

When a young mother dies of cancer, are we supposed to accept God's decree? When famine engulfs Darfur, are we supposed to say that God has nothing to do with it? No, we Jews demand to know where God is in our world. And if the answer is, nowhere, then why do we even need God? To continually test us? To challenge our faith?

Maybe for some fraction of the 15% of us who have implacable faith, this is acceptable. But for the rest of us, we who belong to that 85% crowd, this is precisely what we reject!

For the rest of us, faith has to be something else – something more satisfying, more complex, in a word – more *believable*! So, where in Judaism do we find *that* God and *that* faith?

To search for this answer, again we have to go back to Abraham, our man of faith. Our rabbis in a Midrash compare the young Abraham to a traveler who is wandering from place to place. Suddenly, he comes upon a great and beautiful palace. It's all aglow, with light shining out from every window, and he looks at that palace, radiant and orderly, and wonders, is it possible that such a palace would lack a person to look after it?

Rashi, our famous 11th century commentator, explains to us that the palace is really a metaphor for our world. And Abraham, standing there, is asking himself that age old question - how did this incredible universe, so orderly & magnificent, come into being out of absolutely nothing?

This is the same question you and I still ask ourselves today and, even with all of our vast scientific ability, we are not yet able to answer it. Is the world a random accident with no meaning or purpose? Or, does a mysterious Source, whatever that might be, conduct our universe?

The philosopher, Martin Buber, said that in the absence of this scientific answer, whatever you and I choose to believe, is essentially nothing more than a great leap of faith – a leap into what he called, the realm of danger and risk. Because on this one philosophical guess, you and I stake the very meaning of our lives!

As Abraham stood before the palace contemplating this question, he heard God say, there is a Master, so Lech Lecha, go forth. Your mission, Abraham, is to be My holy messenger, with all of its danger and risk.

And this is the beginning of Jewish faith. It is not based on certainty or knowledge. But, faced with the choice between a cold random universe, or one that has meaning, we Jews choose "mission impossible" – Lech Lecha, to go out into the world as God's messengers.

But still, I have to confess to you that this is only part of an answer. Rashi's explanation is well and good – when our *lives* are good. The palace is neatly lit up – the universe is perfectly ordered, just as it should be. No problem, in this kind of world, send me out there – I can be a holy messenger.

But what about when everything is spinning out of control, and our world is colliding with disaster? When Katrina washes away whole communities, or terrorists melt down the World Trade Center? Then, our world can seem godless again. Either that, or God is testing us in unacceptable ways!

For this, we need a different text. And it so happens that we have one.

Listen again to the same parable, but this time, with a very different twist:

Abraham comes upon a palace and it's aglow – in this translation, it's not just lit up, but the palace is literally on fire. We're talking flames shooting out of windows!

And now, Abraham doesn't see order, he sees chaos – the world is on fire! There is corruption, there's sickness, and poverty. And he thinks, is this out of control place without a Master? Maybe there is no God in this world!

But again, the Master appears to Abraham. And this time, God says, "Yes, this is My world, Abraham, and it's on fire. So Lech Lecha – go forth and fix it, go put out the flames!

The Maharzu, who wrote this commentary in the 19th century, totally got it! He doesn't make excuses for all the nasty stuff that happens in the world, or require our passive submission to God's will. In fact, I would say, just the opposite – he demands that we step up and take responsibility!

God says, this is it – this is what I created, for better and for worse. You have your life, you have a heart, you have a mind. There's your toolbox! So, Lech Lecha – get going, it's not a perfect world, but it's your project now!

Go find the cures to heal the sick. Go help those Hurricane victims who are still stranded in their FEMA trailers. Go work on building peace between nations.

Don't pray for me to do it – Lech Lecha – get out there yourself!

Sometimes, I think that when it comes to our expectations about prayer, you and I are far too narcissistic and self-absorbed. We pray because we want stuff from God. It's all good stuff – like healing, and world peace. But, still we're asking God to make it happen for us. And then, when we get it or we don't get it, either way we're done and we go away.

The Maharzu would tell that 85% of us that, if this is why we pray, then we've got it all wrong. To borrow a phrase from John F. Kennedy, prayer is not about asking what God can do for us; prayer is about asking what we can do for God!

When the palace is burning, God calls to us from the flames. We are the ones who need to act – not God!

As you know, we live in very indulgent times. We have a consumer mentality, primarily because we have so much shoved at us all the time. Our world is rich with opportunities for the taking – from hundreds of cable channels, to the infinite internet, to shopping malls with countless corridors. Like the insatiable plant in "Little Shop of Horrors," our mantra is "feed me." Feed me with fun, feed me with information, feed me with stuff, feed me with a challenge and my next big thrill!

We're trained to look at our schools, our jobs, sometimes even our spouses and children for what they can offer us. And if we come to feel that it's not enough, then we just might walk.

In this kind of culture, it's not surprising that we look at God as the greatest supplier of all. God is even more exponentially infinite than the internet! God has all the channels on the remote. So, if God doesn't give us what we ask for, we're outta here!

But, what right do we have to ask that of God? When our children complain that we don't do enough for them, our answer is often – hey, I gave you life didn't I? I brought you into this world and clothed you, and sheltered you, and fed you. So, God gave us a world, a life, and the ability to fix our problems.

God is not testing us. God does not have a conscious mind to will evil, or illness, or natural disaster upon us. On the contrary, this is just the design of God's universe, such as it is, perfect or not – and it's been entrusted to us now.

So, why should we pray to God to end disease, when we can discover the cures? Why should we pray to God for happiness, when we can make each other happy? Why should we pray to God for miracles, when the world itself, from the smallest particle of matter to the greatest stars above, is already a miracle?

Why should we be passive believers, when we can rail against injustice, fight against evil, lift the oppressed from their poverty and the sick from their suffering. We Jews are not meant to be passive, accepting believers; we are meant to be *defiant* believers.

And this is the lesson that Abraham finally learned at Mt. Moriah, with a slaughtering knife in his hand and his son bound on the altar. I am relieved to be able to share with you one small piece of evidence that Abraham, at the greatest moment of decision in his life, did finally step up and take responsibility. We have a High Holiday prayer that says, "May the One who answered Abraham's prayer at Mt. Moriah, answer us" – an indication that perhaps Abraham was not silent after all. Abraham's actual words at that trembling moment are not given to us. But we can imagine that, as any father would, he cried in outrage against God's unjust demand. We have reason to believe that Abraham did indeed stand up, and raise a defiant protest to God!

You see, we Jews are people of faith, sometimes even in spite of God. Consider this story, written over 50 years ago by Zvi Kolitz. It's called, Yosl Rakover Talks to God.

Yosl's last words were said to have been found in a small bottle amid the charred ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto. He came to be known in Jewish lore as, "The Defiant Jew."

I, Yosl, son of David Rakover of Tarnopol, a follower of the Gerrer Rebbe and descendant of the righteous, learned, and holy ones of the families Rakover, am writing these lines as the houses of the Warsaw Ghetto are in flames, and the house I am in is one of the last that has not yet caught fire.

He goes on to describe how his once prosperous family was killed in the Ghetto. His wife, his five children – one by one they perished at the hands of the Nazis. Bullets pierced his wife and their seven month old child in her arms. Starvation, took the life of his 10 year old, who collapsed on the street while fleeing from her Nazi pursuers, who caught her foraging for a scrap of bread on the other side of the Wall. Tuberculosis killed Jacob on the day of his bar mitzvah. And Eva, she lost her life at the age of 15, in a children's round up.

And now, in his final moments, knowing that by sun-up, the flames will take him, too, he pens these words:

I cannot say, after all I have lived through, that my relation to God is unchanged. But with absolute certainty I can say that my faith in Him has not altered by a hairsbreadth.

I die at peace, but not pacified, conquered and beaten but not enslaved, bitter but not disappointed, a believer but not a supplicant, a lover of God but not His blind Amen-sayer.

Here, then, are my last words to You God . . . None of this will avail You in the least! You have done everything to make me lose my faith in You, to make me cease to believe in You. But I die exactly as I have lived, an unshakeable believer in You.

Shema Yisrael! Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad.

Thus, Yosl met his death in the Warsaw Ghetto. Like the flames of Abraham's mythical palace, the flames of the Warsaw Ghetto rose up. But, to his final breath, also like Abraham, Yosl challenged God. He knew that faith means being Yisrael – a God-wrestler to the end.

We ourselves are not atop Mt. Moriah with a slaughtering knife in our hand, or the last holdouts of the Warsaw Ghetto with a rifle in our arms. But, all the same, this Rosh Hashanah is our hour of reckoning. And in this spirit, I would challenge you to reassess your faith. Despite the difficulties you may have met, I challenge you reject the existential nihilism which declares the universe an accident, and your life to be without purpose. And to instead, consider that a mysterious and Holy Source of Being, endows *your* life with holy potential.

On this day of birth and rebirth of the world, it is as if the world is entrusted to us anew. Again, we stand before the palace, and God calls to us from the shooting flames. Lech Lecha, go forth as My holy messengers – bring justice, lift oppression, heal the sick, love your neighbor. Do not passively pray for Me to do them, says God. These are things for you to do. So when you pray, pray with all your heart and soul and might, that you might find the courage to do them.

Abraham Joshua Heschel once wrote that, “Those who rise from prayer better persons, their prayer is answered.”

And this is my wish for each of you – that on this Rosh Hashanah eve/day, you will hear God in the fire, and make your prayer an answer.