

I was raised in a religion of the heart, and I use the word "heart" in a modern understanding of its meaning -- a religion centered on feelings.

But as a young Christian, one of the key feelings I felt was fear. I vividly remember listening to radio preachers on Sunday mornings before going to church, experiencing fear of hell, a fear of eternal damnation.

Now I realize that we are gathered here today with a liturgy that seems to imply a similar threat. The gates are not long from closing, ready to slam shut with a few blasts of the shofar. Yes, our beautiful new prayer book tells us it's time to repent so we can be on the right side of those gates before it's too late.

But the fear I felt as a youngster and what I experience today as a member of the tribe are very different. In other words, Judaism reshaped my perception of the world.

To get to that, I think I should first share a bit more about my journey.

As a child, I did harbor a healthy fear of getting crossways with God. But I was raised by loving parents who also taught me about forgiveness. And they also taught me to love learning and exploring.

However, I didn't open the door to a deeper understanding of my relationship with the spiritual until my freshman year in college.

For the first time, at the tender age of 18, I encountered people who didn't believe in God. And one guy I knew even talked about a book called "The Passover Plot," conjecturing that Jesus and his disciples had conspired to get him off the cross just in time, place his injured body in a tomb, and then take him away to heal up and "rise from the dead" so he could play the role of Messiah.

That was one of the first real religious challenges I remember and it did open me up to a new way of thinking.

It was at that point that I began to explore ideas that had been off limits in my past. I still held onto the idea of Jesus the Messiah, but it began to gel in my mind that he was a Jew whose followers called him a rabbi.

It wasn't too long after that period of my life that I met the woman who would join me on a forty-year odyssey as man and wife. And in so many ways, Esther has been my teacher, a shaper of who I am.

My beautiful bride, like her namesake in the Bible, is a woman of courage. She too was born into Christianity, but she is also a natural born skeptic. It's a good thing it was love at first sight, because some of her beliefs might have otherwise scared me away. To this day, she is fond of saying, that even as she popped out of the womb, she didn't believe any of that miracle stuff.

We began exploring other religions together, both east and west, and eventually ended up in a Unitarian-Universalist congregation. We thrived there. We had new friends who called themselves recovering Catholics, we enjoyed the company of drum beating pagans, and we got to know more than a few Jews who had left their faith tradition behind.

But soon we realized that our friends there were spending most of their time thinking about what they are not. Esther and I needed to explore who we are.

At this point, Esther attended a lecture series featuring a reform rabbi here in Houston, a series that culminated in a Passover Seder at Christ Church Cathedral in downtown Houston. We both attended that Seder a little more than 20 years ago and we instantly knew we had to learn more about this tradition that had survived for thousands of years.

Our next destination on our spiritual journey was Congregation Emanuel. It was the only Jewish congregation I knew about in Houston. But later we discovered Beth Israel, where we started out studying Torah on Shabbat, and that's where my Jewish learning deepened.

One of the traits of the ancients we learned about in our study of Torah was their imperfections. No perfect people here, and we realized we were becoming part of a people who believed in reality.

Nature is full of imperfections and the Hebrew Bible is a collection of stories about a realistic, imperfect people. Eve allowed herself to be manipulated, Jonah tried his best to avoid the call to duty, Abraham began life in a world of idols and let his wife to be taken away by another man. Jacob – well Jacob and some of his sons certainly had their flaws. I could go on. It's a long list. But what's important to me is that their flaws make them real, make them human.

Along the way, the Hebrews eventually found themselves trapped in a narrow place, lulled into bondage by their Egyptian rulers.

Moses was tapped to rescue them, but he had his faults too. We're told the greatest prophet of them all more than once let his temper go unchecked.

And we the people? We are described in the Torah as a stiff-necked bunch, resisting change, rejecting faith and succumbing to fear.

But thanks to Judaism, I have come to understand that damnation for my imperfections isn't what I need to be worried about. I've come to understand that, as Franklin Delano Roosevelt

so aptly observed, it is fear itself that we need to try to overcome, the kind of fear that kept the ancients stuck, and the kind of fear that keeps me, and maybe you, trapped in a narrow place, a place of bondage. It's fear that slows me down in my search for a life of wholeness, a life lived in Shalom.

We all know the story of the wandering in the desert – it is our story and it is my story. The Torah tells us about events along the way, a path guided by Adonai the Eternal, manifested for the ancient Hebrews as a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night.

As it turned out, most of those living the Exodus were actually being led through the remaining experiences of their lives during those forty years. They would not be allowed into the promised land because of their fear of change, their fear of the unknown.

The wandering in the desert is the main lesson plan that shapes us, that shapes me. You might say it's the main lesson plan for the entire Hebrew people.

So here's my hope. I don't want to be left behind in the desert. I don't want to be left on the wrong side of the gates – the very gates that are poised to close, right here in our presence, this afternoon on Yom Kippur.

We're all looking at our own flaws today. We're all hoping to turn over a new leaf. And I think we all know what's required of us.

But this desert we're trekking through this afternoon is a cruel place where it's easy to stay lost. There is no actual pillar of smoke or fire to follow.

I look to those miraculous pillars of smoke and fire as a metaphor for the guidance that is brought to life for us by the Torah, the lessons that keep us trying to hit the marks set out for us by the prophets – the teachings that guide us out of the narrow place and out of the desert. I see the teachings and traditions of Judaism as my map. I see them as shaping me along the way, and helping to give my life meaning.

Pillars of guidance -- the five books, the prophets and the writings.

Esther and I came to Houston 37 years ago and I ended up broadcasting for most of those years on KTRH Radio as a morning news person. It was a job that allowed me to provide a useful service to Houstonians, but it wasn't an easy job and it forced me to grow up. So when I became a Jew, about 20 years ago, I began to see that doing that job was a true mitzvah.

It was especially so during those long days and nights, with all my other team members, on the air during hurricanes, floods and shattering events like 9-11. Judaism taught me to overcome my fear and live, and love, a life of service – to comfort those in distress and to help Houstonians protect themselves.

During all these years, Judaism has filled Esther's and my life with the blessings of fellowship and friendship – friends to study with, to relive our redemption together during Passover Seders, to break bread together on Shabbat and in the Sukkah -- and to pray together.

Esther and I came to Judaism late in life, so we didn't have to explain our new identities to our parents, of blessed memory. They were gone by then. But we regret that we didn't discover this "faith of the ages" much earlier in our lives so we could have raised our children as Jews.

But that's the past. In the present, I walk through days and weeks, often failing to live the life that I aspire to. But each week comes to a close in the same way. Shabbat is always there, guiding me to regroup and start again.

I love the tradition of lighting candles at the threshold of Shabbat. What a beautiful symbol it is to join with Jews around the world, lighting those lights as the sun comes down. Visualize the glow of it, moving from one longitude and time zone to the next. It reminds me that I am supposed to be like those candles, bringing light into the world, reminding me to try a little harder tomorrow and next week. And Yom Kippur? This day is known as the Great Shabbat!

Judaism has helped me to understand that faith isn't just a state of mind that eases my fears about the "world to come." Judaism has taught me that faith is a state of consciousness that helps me to put one foot in front of the other, even when the narrow place we all find ourselves in, Mitzraim, feels tighter than usual, and sloggng our way through the desert seems tougher than ever. My Jewish faith is what keeps me striving for Shalom, a life lived in courage, action and wholeness.

Earlier, I stated that in my youth, I experienced a religion of the heart – where my consciousness was centered on feelings. But I have come to understand that in Judaism, the heart is the center of more than just feelings. It is our center of wholeness. As it is written in Proverbs, "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Prov. iv. 23).

I have come to understand that the faith of Judaism, **whole hearted Judaism**, is sometimes nothing less than courage – not only courage to stand up in the face of wrongdoing, but also courage to plod through the desert, every day and every week, trying to live life above fear, as a burning beacon, or sometimes as nothing more than a flickering candle – a candle that is sometimes stoked by laughter, and somehow keeps burning even when splashed by tears.

So here we are, this, the afternoon of Yom Kippur, 5777. The gates are still open, and thanks to Judaism, I no longer see getting through the gates as a choice between heaven and hell.

For me, making it to the other side of the gates, is getting to a place where Judaism is once again, **and always**, that pillar of fire, sometimes disguised as a mere candle, that lights the way on the "Shalom" side of the gate.

So blow shofar blow. Thanks to this ancient, but always new faith, I'm ready to step through the gates and into the new year, hungry not only to break the fast, but hungry for a fresh start.