

Erev Rosh Hashanah
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“Judaism: Our Reliable Faith”

When I was a boy, my neighborhood friends and I had an idea. We needed to build a fort; not to defend ourselves from invaders, but to stake out our territory, of course. With extra wood and supplies from our parents' garages, we nailed and tacked together a fair 5 x 5 hut to hold a few of us. Like packrats, we brought in a few things to make it livable for the few hours we might spend there. A few days later after school, we checked on that fort. To our horror, it was turned over on its side. Who did this? Those invaders? We soon learned that men from the electric company came by; they needed access to the large electric box that sat right behind our well-built but poorly placed fort. What took a few boys to assemble required only two men to turn over like some popsicle-stick structure.

We're all fort-builders of sorts. We all build our lives with what we have and with what we can acquire. Some of our building projects --- like families, businesses, and dreams --- withstand hard tests; but, who hasn't built great things only to have them torn apart by circumstances out of our control? The best test of our building skills isn't revealed in how long our projects endure; the best test is reflected in how we support them over time and how we respond if they fail.

On Rosh Hashanah, we fortify what we've been building. In synagogue, the plan seems to be that if we get our prayers right, if we get squared away with each other and with God, then we have a chance to enjoy a sweet New Year. It's supposed to work that way. That's the formula on which we have staked our faith.

We're not the first nor will we be the last ones to wrestle with this formula. Our Yiddish ancestors used to say, “Man plans and God laughs.” They didn't say it because they were without faith. On the contrary, they said it with great faith, because it was often the only thing they had in abundance. From Jewish history and life experience, they observed that the Jewish people were often bent from oppression and persecution. But, because they knew Jewish history, they also knew that the Jewish people never broke. They bent, but they never broke.

Last spring, our community gathered at the ERJCC for another vigil after another shooting at a synagogue. This was the second one after the tragedy in Pittsburgh, which happened only 11 months ago. As I approached the crowd and made eye-contact with other Jewish leaders, I said something I didn't expect to say out loud to them. But, I did. I said, “I can't do this anymore. I can't keep attending vigils. I can't keep telling the community to hold candles and pray.” Thoughts and prayers, alone, will not repair what hate and evil have torn apart. Faith binds us together so we won't break; but, once we're bound together, faith must compel us to make a positive difference.

Many wonderful achievements have been built on faith that provide optimism and hope. In the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God is one God. Our pathways to the One God are particular to us, but they are not exclusive. We are all the progeny of one first human being. Our Sages taught that God created one man, Adam, from the beginning so that no one could ever say, "My father was greater than yours." Our pathways are as diverse as the people who are on them, and we are bound by shared ethics that are not relative or trivial. But, left in the wrong hands, faith has failed unquestionably.

In the wrong hands, we fail when we use the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible or the Koran as eternal law codes. Though some believe they contain God's word, it doesn't change their importance if we choose to believe that they are human words inspired by God. Either way, they should guide us to the highest ideals for love between humankind and love between us and God. We ascribe to these words a sacred quality, because of their origin, but also because of their remarkable and enduring journey from ancient times down to our own. Having succeeded in reaching us, the obligation of the faithful is to discern from their ancient and translated sources the greatest lessons for our times.

Evolution of human thought was inspired by individual and social aspirations for knowledge and understanding. It has helped us conclude that perspectives on human equality --- racial, ethnic, sexual and religious, etc. --- have evolved, too. We have more understanding about the natural world than any generation before us. We have defined universal boundaries for crimes against humanity, and we know that 2000-year-old prohibitions against some sins bear little if any resemblance to the environment in which we might find them, today. It isn't enough to thump our Bibles to point at our claim on divine understanding and ultimate authority.

Faith in the right hands was always supposed to provide the right questions; not simply the right answers. Our sacred books filled with ancient words take us on a journey of history, sociology, religious thought, economics, and more that should constantly arouse our curiosity.

For example, our sacred texts highlight the term, "Pikuach Nefesh," to save a life is above all else. Jewish law even permits us to set aside strict Sabbath prohibitions to save a life. Children shouldn't begin or end their days hungry, and senior adults shouldn't have to choose between paying rent or buying medication. The right question remains, "How do we transform social policy to save lives?" At Beth Israel, we participate in Kids' Meals. Every month we prepare hundreds of sack lunches for children to begin their day with a healthy meal. And, senior adult members of the Houston Jewish community know that they're never really alone or without resources for daily living.

Likewise, we're taught "Do not put a stumbling block before the blind," and in Talmud, "Don't put yourself in a dangerous place and then pray for a miracle." These texts come to mind every time there's a massacre in our country at schools, malls, and, sadly, at synagogues. The right question might be, "How can Judaism's passion for truth and reason help remove obstacles to public safety and restore confidence and peace in public spaces?" At Beth Israel, our committee called ABIDE, which stands for Advocacy at Beth Israel for Diversity through

Education, provides Jewish education and advocacy on matters that our congregation's members identify as important to them. Gun safety has emerged as a priority for us.

And, thirty-six times in Torah, we're told that we were strangers in Egypt; we will forever know the heart of the stranger. And, though we were once at home in England, Spain, Eastern Europe and Germany, we were driven from those places, too. We weren't always allowed even into America when we needed to be. In WWII, the ship our people sailed in to these shores was sent back to Nazi-torn Europe, where they were murdered. The right question must be, "How can comprehensive immigration reform reflect lessons in Jewish history as a model for welcoming strangers into a land of hope and promise?"

So, when we gather at vigils and invoke God's name, as if to ask, "Where are you, God?" we're asking the wrong question. The right question is where is humankind? It's always been the question, and we know it's true. Our Sages taught that God gave us Torah as the blueprint for a sturdy world and trusted us with it.

The world isn't growing less complex. There is nothing we can build that will stand between the present and the future. For the first time in history, our children are growing up in a world that we're learning about from them through technology. But, some of the best lessons about how to address the world's complexities, technologies, and prejudices are still found in books of faith bequeathed to us. We're not looking into these books for ancient standards of times gone-by; we're looking for benchmarks that reveal the greatest human freedom and potential ever known to humankind. We need parents, teachers and preachers of every faith to study the blueprints again; to find the right questions, and to shore up our broken world.

If I could ask our ancient ancestors a question, I might begin by asking, "Is this what you expected us to do with your books of faith?" Then I'd like to turn the question to us, "What can sacred texts teach us about our duty to each other in a world of unprecedented technology, growing violence and unyielding discrimination?" I believe that a good answer isn't without faith.

It's like a man in our community who was married to his wife for more than 40 years. They were blessed years. He's a respected professional, and she served in a non-profit where she was loved, truly loved, for her generous service to her clients. One day, when she visited her doctor, she learned that her diagnosis was serious. She was told that she had only six months to live. They were devastated. He openly complained, "I've gone to synagogue regularly; my wife made Shabbes for our family every week; and, she was a real *ishet chayyil*, a woman of valor. How could it be?" If there were words written over his head, they would have been the question, "What happened to the faith on which I relied?"

Some days after her funeral, when everyone went home to their own families, he was alone for the first time in more than 40 years. He assured his adult children that he was fine; but he wasn't really.

At dinner time, he opened the pantry to find some food to prepare. He could make spaghetti. He filled a pot of water and put it on the stove. But, the spaghetti was too long for the pot he chose; and the hard noodles were difficult to control. He made a mess. He gave up. He had no choice but to call his daughter. Immediately, she came to the house. She calmed her father, and made him a proper dinner.

The next day, his granddaughter called. She told her grandfather that she was coming over to make him dinner. He was so relieved and grateful. When she arrived, she began to take groceries out of the bag she brought with her. He asked her what she was going to make him? She told him that she was going to make one of grandma's recipes. He was taken aback. But, how did she know how to make his wife's delicious recipes that she took with her to the grave, and which he would never taste again? His granddaughter explained that she learned them from her. She didn't want her recipes to die with her; she wanted the next generation to know them.

After his wife's death, the man felt forsaken by God. He didn't anticipate this blessing. When his granddaughter came to the house, he felt his wife's love endured beyond the grave. He would be nourished again; his body and soul would feel less empty. Food never filled the void that her absence left behind; but, his outlook changed. First, he felt entirely broken. Though he still feels bent over, he's able to stand up straight more often. Then, faith returned in new ways. Rather than wearing his faith like a defense against the world; now he wears it as testimony to faith's ability to prepare him for the future.

For those who are skeptical or agnostic, Rabbi Jonathan Sachs, posed the thesis that science and religion are both important. In his book, "The Great Partnership: Science, Religion and the Search for Meaning," Sachs explains that each asks an important question. "Science takes things apart" and asks, how do they work? "Religion puts them back together," and asks what do they mean? His book's larger purpose was to point to Judaism as a reliable faith. It embraces science for what it can reveal, and assigns religion a role to define for science an ethical purpose. So, Sachs concludes that even an agnostic or secular humanist can find wisdom in Judaism's enduring ability to withstand recurring forces that propel us into a future of unknowns but not unfamiliar human territory. I'm hopeful.

I began by recalling my childhood memory of that backyard fort. I recalled it because it was one of the first things my friends and I built from stuff our parents left behind. That fort didn't last very long; but from that experience we learned that better materials and better planning can lead to better results. Judaism, Torah, and faith are not the "stuff our parents left behind." Their sacred teachings became ours. Over many years, they helped us bend without breaking, too. Now, as the world grows more complex, it's time to build again and we have the best materials. Our heritage is a rich inheritance; our Torah is source of timeless ethical ideals; and, Judaism is our reliable faith. We're all builders.

May the New Year be for us, and all God's children, a year of good health, prosperity and peace. Amen