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### “When it’s Hard to Believe”

If all we had to do was show up on Yom Kippur, it would be so easy. But according to Jewish law, the Day of Atonement doesn’t atone for us. That is, there is no magic that happens here. There is no mystical transformation that happens just because we show up. Not yet. Instead, it begins with personal atonement. We ask forgiveness for the transgressions we committed against each other, knowingly and unknowingly. Then we can ask for God’s forgiveness for the transgressions we committed. And, God replies, “Salachti Ki’dvarecha,” I have forgiven according to your plea. Finally, yes, the Day of Atonement does atone for us and we are cleansed.

The cleansing effects of atonement can be real. We can even expect to achieve salvation after years of participating in the process. But now you’re wondering --- did he just use the word, “Salvation”? For a Jewish person, what is salvation? Salvation is the rescue of an errant soul; and in Judaism, an errant soul is a work in progress. Each of us is a work in progress --- no matter what your mother told you. So how do we begin?

In Judaism, we bear personal responsibility for the well-being of our own soul. It’s never someone else’s responsibility to rescue our soul for us. It’s what Milton Steinberg called, “Personal salvation,” versus “Vicarious salvation.” We save ourselves, as it were, with Torah and mitzvot, because they are “our life and the length of our days” Our entire life is dedicated to the conclusion that we were born as a blessing and our life’s journey, though not perfect, is filled with opportunities for glimpses of perfection between moments of transgression and repair.

It’s like the man who, when asked, how he overcame many challenges with hope and resilience, used to say, “I learned to walk between the raindrops.” It sounds poetic. But if you think that it’s always raining, then you have to learn to stay dry.

When a person near the end of his life told me that he had terrible regrets, he confided in me with a final confession. In Judaism, a Vidui, a confession, acknowledges one’s imperfections and one’s efforts to atone for them. An act of atonement, even on one’s deathbed is a final holy deed. This man told me about his relationships and his temperament, but also about his self-awareness and contrition. For his sake, I acknowledged the acts of lovingkindness he did perform, often anonymously, and how even one good deed and act of repentance can tilt the balance of judgment in his favor. Such is Judaism’s expectations for the human soul, not to suffer or wither, but to be comforted and thrive.

Each of us, on our own, can seek and find this salvation, too. But can a whole people find salvation? Can the Jewish people be comforted and thrive after the year it has endured, and the history it has suffered? Yes. The answer is Yes, it can. God's love for the Jewish people is without question. God's love for the Jewish people is unconditional. The perennial and often unanswered question is not does God believe in us, but rather, how can we believe, again, in God, and in the destiny of the Jewish people?

Just before the High Holy Days began, American Reform rabbis joined a Zoom meeting with our Israeli Reform rabbinic colleagues in Israel. The purpose of the meeting was to learn from *them* what they would be telling *their* own congregations in Israel one year after October 7th.

Rabbi Michal Ken Tor told us that one of her congregants asked her not to talk simply about "belief." Instead, she was asked to talk about "how to believe." Even the rabbi was struck by the subtle but important difference between "belief" and "how to believe." In our Zoom meeting, the rabbi explained how she understood the difference.

Her congregants know intuitively that belief doesn't come automatically in Judaism. They know that faith comes, but it doesn't have to come first. First comes awareness of faith. Then comes conscious acts of mitzvah and obligation. They sustain our covenant with each other and with God.

Belief is just a noun. It's a thing. Like any "thing," it might not be easy to grasp. It might not be attainable at all. So if all we talk about is "belief," then we might be talking too conceptually. In times of deep struggle, concepts are not enough. They needed a plan. Her congregants begged their rabbi, "Tell us how to believe, again!" It's a marvel that Israelis want to talk about "how to believe" at all. Maybe you and I would have stopped believing at this point; but they haven't, and, of course, neither should we. The rabbi continued.

Michal Ken Tor said, "to believe," is a verb. To believe requires action. And Judaism is a religion of action. She taught that "belief," like "love," doesn't just occur. We have to create it; we have to make it happen. When we do, then it becomes something we can observe, feel, and know for ourselves. She told us that the Hebrew language is a perfect model for understanding this.

In Hebrew, words are constructed out of three-letter roots. For example, the Hebrew word for belief is "Eminah," and its three-letter root is *aleph-mem-nun*, the same three letters that spell, "Amen." Amen means, "I believe," or "I agree." They're connected. One is a noun; the other is a verb. In English, the same connection cannot be made, but it can be in Hebrew. If the goal is "eminah," belief, then our work begins with how to create ways to believe and agree as a congregational community. If we succeed, then we can say, "Amen."

We start in Torah on our path to believing. When the Israelites stood at Sinai to receive God's teachings, they said in one voice, "Na'aseh V'nishma!" Simple translations give us, "We will faithfully do all that God commanded!" But the words, "Na'aseh V'nishma" really mean that we will first do (na'aseh), and then we will understand (nishma). It's as our Sages explained,

“Our understanding comes through the doing.” In effect, do the mitzvah first. Then you’ll understand.

It sounds counter-intuitive. Where else but in Judaism, are we commanded to do something we’ve never done only to understand its meaning later? Would you see a person who’s never practiced medicine before but would like to learn about it on you? Would you trust your car to a person who’s never changed the oil before but wants to learn on yours? Of course not. But in Judaism understanding comes through the doing. It’s an amazing act of believing.

Perhaps you’re not convinced. Maybe you’re feeling unwilling or feeling especially defeated, this year. Torah was prepared for your feelings now even as it was then. To the Israelites who also struggled with believing before they entered the Promised Land, Moses told them, as we’ll hear tomorrow in Torah:

*Surely, this mitzvah which I command you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may do it?” Neither is it beyond the sea that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may do it?” No, the thing is very close to you, [it is already] in your mouth, and in your heart, to do it” (Deuteronomy 30:11-14).*

Moses didn’t say that it’s in your mouth and in your heart to **understand** it; he said, it’s part of you; now go do it. The understanding comes through the doing.

When your mother or grandmother stood before the Sabbath candles and waved her hands before her eyes three times and then recited the candle blessing, did you ever ask her why she did that? There are so many reasons why, and each one is right and each one is personal. The only thing we need to know is that she did the mitzvah to light the Sabbath candles. The deepest understanding and impression it had on you came through doing it because she did it.

Rabbi David Polish, of blessed memory, found meaning in mitzvah through the history and shared experiences of the Jewish people. He explained that “When [Jews perform] one of the many life-acts known as mitzvah to remind [themselves] of one of those moment of encounter, what was only episodic become epochal, and what was only a moment in Jewish history becomes eternal in Jewish life.” The single moment of participating even in an ancient ritual, like lighting the candles, can connect us with Jews everywhere in the world, today, and with those who came before us in the past.

For Polish, the source of mitzvah flows not only from a single commanding voice, but also from the sheer power and enormity of history, which persists in the ways we continue to do what we do.

Still others might feel just as authentically commanded by their personal duty, rather than an Eternal commander. Their source of motivation is bound to a unique moment in our people's narrative, too. Expressing it through traditional symbols on Shabbat, or in the ways they support the synagogue and our community, enables them to continue seeing themselves as though they stood at Sinai, too; and, that their duty is to bring the power of that revelatory moment into moments in need of revelation, today.

When I was a boy, our family had a blue and white box in our home. It was for "Keren Ami," in English, the Fund of My People. We filled it with loose change to support Israel in its time of crisis in the late 1960s and early 1970s. To a young boy in the Chicago suburbs, Israel was as far away to me as Houston, Texas, was, at the time. But we put coins and bills into that box because through the act of giving, we came to understand as a family that a small box of coins contributed to something bigger than us. It was a formative lesson. This act of giving led to belief, too.

Decades later, doing still leads to understanding and belief. In America, there's a surge in antisemitism but there's also a surge in Jewish acts of believing --- synagogue affiliation continues, Jewish participation in education and community building is exciting, and, yes, conversion to Judaism is happening, too. Such acts of believing give us more than hope; they give us belief and reasons to say, "Amen."

Rabbi Michal Ken Tor believes that Israelis want to return to the days when they could do a mitzvah and drive Palestinian children to hospitals in Israel for treatment; and when they shared time in the fields trading agricultural skills and produce in friendly relationships and conversations. Those friendships weren't dreams of old; they were reasons to believe that two peoples living across two borders could know peace. It led to faith, and to times when they said, "Amen."

And when Shabbat comes to all our homes every week, we can bless the lights, the wine, and the challah. Maybe you'll do it because you feel commanded to do it; maybe you'll do it because you're moved to do it; but I believe that if you do it one week, and then the next, you'll understand. Binding yourself to Shabbat, made sacred by God, after six days of work, can lead to greater belief in what it means to be Jewish. And, if on Shabbat, we do it even for our own reasons we might hear an echo of Jews around the world joining us in saying, "Amen."

Ahad Ha'am, a cultural Zionist, taught that "More than Israel has kept the Sabbath; the Sabbath has kept the people Israel." Is it true?

In a Midrash, a rabbinic story, the rabbis explain that it's like a king whose son fled from the castle. The king sent his best men to find him. When they did, the son told them that he wasn't able and didn't want to make the journey home. And his father, the king, was unwilling to meet him even half-way. But, Adonai, our God, whose children go astray and are unwilling to come all the way back are not abandoned by God. Unlike a king, Adonai comes where we are, well beyond the half-way point, to mend our broken hearts, to hear our prayer, and to accompany us all the way home, again.

So, as far as we've gone from belief, we can return as far as we're able through acts of believing. Each step and each effort doesn't have to come from a leap of faith, but rather, and more importantly, from acts of believing. Through participation in Jewish life, connected to our people's past and its destiny, we might find belief along the way, too. Perfect belief? Not necessarily. Constant belief? Probably not. But sufficiently renewed belief in our people's narrative to participate in making a difference? Absolutely. Today, tomorrow, and in the New Year.

Understanding comes through the doing. If atonement is dear to us, let's demonstrate it by participating in acts of believing what is already in our mouths to speak of it; in our hearts to know it; and in our hands to do it." Participating in acts of believing can lead to reasons to have faith. Then over time and at the end of a life well-lived, God willing, we can attest to our own salvation through a lifetime of personal efforts to do better each year.

May this Yom Kippur give us space and time to make amends between us and between us and God. And, then, because the New Year 5785 demands so much of us, let's do it, and let's do it right, for us, for our country, and for Israel, our land and our people. Amen.