

Kol Nidrei 5779
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin
I Believe

I must say I am surprised by how many of you have asked me over the past year about my high school reunion. If you were with us last Yom Kippur morning, you may recall that I spoke about belonging, and began with sharing a few apprehensions about my upcoming 25th high school reunion.

Well, since you asked, it was nice reconnecting with people who I had not seen in so many years. The only surprise was that in all my preparations and stress about what to wear, and questions about who would be there and how much we've changed, it never occurred to me that people would be intrigued, and in some cases, shocked, by what I do. Let me contextualize this a little. Much like Westwood and our surrounding towns, up the road in Belmont I was often the only Jew in class. I graduated high school with five other Jewish kids.

Through my classmates' primarily Catholic, Protestant, and Mormon eyes, I was not only a rabbi, but a woman of the cloth. This was unusual. More than one person said to me, "At least you are doing something meaningful." And more than one person shared how badly they felt about no longer going to church. So, you could say that in addition to the mediocre music and beer, my high school reunion turned out to include some impromptu spiritual counseling.

It's interesting, when I think about it, they are right. I am blessed to be able to guide you through significant moments of your lives, and to shape meaningful prayer experiences for myself, and hopefully others as well. But, I do not believe that the realm of spirituality resides with rabbis or clergy alone. I believe that when I am fulfilling my mission as a rabbi, I am helping you to grow spiritually and to foster your own sense of meaning, purpose, and belief.

Belief may be a hard thing for some of us these days. And yet, tonight, the ancient, stirring melody of *Kol Nidre* strikes a chord and calls us back. The next twenty four hours will challenge us to believe in something: in ourselves - the possibility that we can change and improve; in one another – that humanity is good and that we can make someone else's life better; in God – the spirit, breath, and Source of Life in us and in the universe. The next twenty-four hours calls attention not only to our physical hunger, but invites us to engage with our spiritual hunger as well.

Some of you may recall the National Public Radio broadcast called, *This I Believe*. The program engaged listeners in a discussion of core beliefs that guide our lives. The series was based on the 1950s radio program, hosted by acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow.

Americans would gather by their radios to hear compelling stories from Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, and Harry Truman, as well as cab drivers, bankers and butchers, scientists and secretaries – anyone able to distill into a few minutes the guiding principles by which they lived. Their words brought comfort and inspiration to a country worried about the Cold War and racial division.

Murrow offered this preamble to the program: “This I Believe. By that name, we present the personal philosophies of thoughtful men and women in all walks of life... It has been a difficult task and a delicate one. People don’t speak their beliefs easily or publicly... It would be easier to enumerate the items I do not believe in, than the other way around. And yet in talking to people, in listening to them, I have come to realize that I don’t have a monopoly on the world’s problems... And in learning how others have faced theirs – this has given me fresh ideas about how to tackle mine.” Murrow identified the discomfort some of us may feel about stating our beliefs. He also stated the communal and personal benefit.

Jews come from a long line of belief seekers. Jacob awoke from a dream and uttered, “Behold, God is in this place and I, I did not know.” (Genesis 28:16) The prophet Micah proclaimed, “What does God require of you? To do justice, to love goodness, and to walk humbly with you God.” (Micah 6:8) Later, Anne Frank wrote, “In spite of everything I still believe that people are really good at heart...” (*Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl*)

Our texts and traditions reveal thousands of belief statements, questions, struggles and debates. Belief does not need to be articulated in a lengthy essay or sermon. It can even be just six words, as our tradition has achieved with its core belief statement: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* – Hear O Israel, *Adonai* is our God, *Adonai* is One. (Deuteronomy 6:4) Some Jews pray these words each day; they are the final words we utter at the end of life.

I think for some of us, the G-word, God, gets in the way of belief. This may be because of an older image, often a judgmental authority figure, or limited translation of God that doesn’t speak to us. Or maybe it is because of a negative experience with organized religion, or a tragic event in our lives that caused us to lose faith. Maybe it is that we think our rational minds know better.

Rabbi Leonard Beerman wrote, “To question, to doubt, is a sure sign of our freedom and our reason. It is the image of God within us. But doubt is an ambiguous blessing. It is a sign of our freedom, but it can also be a sign of our inability to give ourselves over to a decision, a commitment.” (Rabbi Rachel Timoner)

It is hard to avoid God during these High Holy Days. There is a place for doubt and struggle, as our people’s name, *Yisrael*, implies. And yes, Judaism is a religion of action. But, as Beerman suggests, I believe that our actions mean more when they stand for something. Behavioral psychology has shown that belief helps with motivation. Belief is the foundation of who we are. Everyone has a belief. What is yours?

Tonight, I would like to share a few of my beliefs with you. I hope that you will reciprocate, and reflect upon and share yours.

I believe in the mystery of the universe and cultivating a sense of wonder. I find God in the wonders of nature and creation, in the mystery of the passing of time, and the unknown of how we got here and when we will depart. I believe in the God of *Shehecheyanu*, which presents the opportunity to notice and be grateful for our lives.

Albert Einstein once said, “There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.” And Rabbi Heschel added that, “Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement.get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal... To be spiritual is to be amazed.”

I especially love when children ask me questions about God. Children often appear freer to express wonder and amazement. Children imagine and live in a fascinating world of make-believe. For example, our own Kindergarten and First Grade students at Beth David asked me, “How can God be in every place at once? What does God look like? How did God make the whole earth?” For kids, God is in every place and every thing, in the taste of birthday cake, in goodnight kisses, and in worms turning leaves into earth. (*Because Nothing Looks Like God*, Lawrence and Karen Kushner)

Of course, God does not actually look like these things. There are things that we can't see, but we still know they are there: like the love between people, the kindness in someone's voice, a cool breeze on a summer night, the sound of silence.

This sense of wonder invites adults, too, to engage in playful make-believe, where we are allowed to not know all the answers, and we are permitted to construct, mold and make our belief. This kind of belief construction can be messy. My theology, the fancy word for belief, is a creative and fluid process that changes over time.

When I look back, it took until around the time I was in high school to question the assumption that God is male. I believe in a God that is male, female, transgender, and beyond gender. Belief should open gates, not shut them. I believe in a radically inclusive divinity in all humankind, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and religion. In this year of #MeToo, I believe we need to consider the ways that hierarchical, all-powerful masculine images of God have excluded and caused more harm than good. In the face of abuses of power, abuses of communities, and abuses of individuals, I hear God crying, “MeToo.”

In Jewish tradition, the rabbis imagined God crying alongside the exiled Jewish people. (*Lamentations Rabbah*) Now, too, if we are truly created in God's image, when people sin against other people, when people treat others as less than equal and less sacred, I believe God echoes, “MeToo.”

In a broken world, God, too, is broken. I believe it is up to us to do everything we can to repair the harm. It is not enough to come here on Yom Kippur and confess. We need to believe in the power of our own actions to effect change.

I believe in the power of prayer. Prayer gives voice to our innermost yearnings and vision for our world. The Jewish notion of *minyan*, a community of pray-ers, connects us to something bigger than ourselves. When we show up for others, we count and we matter. I believe in prayers that we find in the prayer book, and prayers that come from our own hearts. Think about Tevya in *Fiddler on the Roof*. He didn't just talk to God when he needed something. He felt comfortable speaking to God throughout his day, and he could draw upon this relationship when things got difficult. For me, prayer is song; ancient melodies that ignite memories and moving melodies that raise up new voices. I believe in Shabbat as a holy well of rejuvenation, joy, pause, and peace.

I believe that God hears our prayers (“*Shema Koleinu*”), but does not generally respond. Well, except for the time when a rabbinic classmate of mine healed my very used Honda Civic that had died on the LA freeway by laying his hands on the old car, and it started again. (true story: for another time) Most of the time, these kinds of things do not happen. I do not believe that God gives us what we want. I do not believe in a God that decides who shall live and who shall die. I do not believe that God alleviates suffering or pain. When my mother was sick, I prayed for her healing, even though I knew that ultimately she would not get better. I believe we can pray for strength and love, and receive strength and love. As Rabbi Naomi Levy writes, “Prayer is ultimately an experience, not a request. It is a sense of being connected, of being part of something larger than ourselves. It is an attempt to be in the presence of God.” (*Talking to God – Personal Prayers for Times of Joy, Sadness, Struggle, and Celebration*)

I believe that we become partners with God when we use our hands, words, and presence to heal and comfort.

A teaching from Rabbi Harold Schulweis, author of the book, *For Those Who Can't Believe - Overcoming Obstacles to Faith*, especially speaks to me. He suggests that in place of asking, “*Where* is God?” we should ask, “*When* is God?” God is in moments – in the lighting of Shabbat candles, in sharing food with the hungry, in the joining together of two loving partners under the *chuppah*, of being by the bedside of a loved one in the last breath of life.

It is time to let God in. It is time to believe again. We all know, whether it is our country or our religious institutions, faith is waning. It is time to believe in ourselves and in our potential; in the goodness and power of humanity; and in God, however we may define the sources of holiness in our lives. In Judaism, faith or *emunah*, is not the absence of doubt. Faith is a commitment. Believing is essential to who we are.

Years ago, a note was found on a cellar wall in Cologne, Germany where Jews hid from Nazis. It said:

I believe in the sun even when it's not shining.
I believe in love even when I can't feel it.
I believe in God even when he is silent.

Ani Ma'amin. Ani ma'amin b'emunah shleimah.

I believe. I believe ...with a complete faith.

These are the words repeated and sung by Jews for centuries. My belief is not yet perfect or complete. It is still changing. Everyone has a belief. What is yours?

Song:

Ani Ma'amin

Ani ma'amin b'emunah shlema

Ani ma'aminah b'emunah shlema

I believe in the sun, even when it's not shining

I believe in love, even when there's no one there

I believe in God, even when He/She is silent

I believe, I believe, with perfect faith

I believe through any trial, there's always a way

but sometimes in this suffering, and hopeless despair

My heart cries for shelter to know someone's there

but a voice rises in me saying, "Hold on my child, I'll give you strength, I'll give you hope, just stay a little while."

May we all feel the sunshine

May we all share in happiness

May we all delight in love

May we be blessed to know peace

Oseh shalom bimromav hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol Yisrael.

(Words and music by Abbie Strauss; adapted words by Batya Ellinoy)