

String of Pearls - Rosh Hashanah 5780 /2019

Sermon - Rabbi Maurice Harris

Thank you so much for welcoming me to the String of Pearls Community. It's an honor to be with you as we celebrate the new year.

Some years ago, a married couple - a mom and a dad in this case - who were congregants of mine had a tragedy happen involving one of their children. In the weeks following their calamity, I met several times with the mom, whom I'll call Miriam, and with her husband and the child's step-father - whom I'll call Tom. During one of these visits, Miriam told me that she didn't know what she believed in anymore. She certainly didn't know if she believed in anything that could be called God - not even theologies that imagine God as a natural, impersonal Force or a Higher Power that helps "bend the moral arc" of the universe. Her life was what the philosopher Ronald Dworkin called "a narrative wreck." There was no world-organizing system, no framework that she could put these events into so that her life still made sense.

Miriam was exhausted and despairing over her ability to cope. As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I did not feel that it was my job to try to get her to *believe* anything. Even though Reconstructionism has a theology - a universalist, serious theology - believing in God is not a requirement for belonging, and there are plenty of people in our congregations who hold a non-theistic worldview.

But in Miriam's case, she described her inability to know what she believed anymore about God as a huge loss, and she was specifically asking me, as a rabbi, to help her with *that*. I had never been through a loss like hers, or a complex of losses like what she was experiencing, and I wasn't really sure what to tell her. I called a rabbinic colleague, Rabbi Rosalind Glazer, and asked her advice.

Rabbi Glazer responded by sharing something she had learned as a hospital chaplain. She said, "When people have just lost their anchor and don't know what they're certain about anymore, sometimes it can help to ask them to look inward and identify what they still do believe in, whatever it might be." That seemed worth trying - offering Miriam an invitation to inventory what she still believed was true.

When I went back to visit Miriam a few days later, I said to her, "Listen, would you be willing to try to tell me something that you *do* believe in right now? It can be anything."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

I said, “We’ve been talking a lot about things that you can’t believe in anymore and how much that hurts. Can you think of something that you *do* believe in, however basic it might be. Like, literally anything - like, ‘I believe that the sun will rise tomorrow morning.’”

She sat back in thought. I started to tell myself that it had been worth a try but this was probably going to be a pastoral dead end, when she said, “I believe that other people care.”

We were focused, together, suddenly in the moment. She spoke again. “There are other people who care. That’s real.”

“Yes, I think that’s right,” I said. “I believe that too. I think we both know that that is true.”

We then talked about the idea that Miriam could experiment with turning her attention to her solid belief that other people care as a basic fact about the universe, no matter what else seemed uncertain. Something small but important had shifted - I could feel that this insight of hers had helped. How much I don’t know, but I was so grateful to Rabbi Glazer. Later, I realized that it also helped me.

We live in an upside-down world, where much that we have had faith in has been torn down, where the ugliest sides of human behavior are on display, here at home but also in so many parts of the world. And it’s a world in which other people care, a world in which throughout human history there have always been people who care, and there will continue to be for as long as humans exist.

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Sometimes in my work I learn important lessons from teachers in other religious traditions, and I’d like to share one of those teachings I came across recently. In his 2002 book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously But Not Literally*, the late Christian theologian Marcus Borg writes that for him, faith is not the assertion of doctrines that are hard to believe. Rather, he says that faith involves coming to believe and trust in things that are *reasonable* to believe, things that can be tested out through human experience. Within his Christian tradition, Rev. Borg remains a controversial figure because he’s the kind of theologian who will say things like he’s not sure whether he believes in the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, but he does believe in the transformative power of the meaning of that mythic story – that love is a greater power than death. (Incidentally, Judaism has its own version of that teaching in the biblical book, Song of Songs, *shir ha-shirim*).

Faith, according to Rev. Borg, is a lot like the other intangibles of life that we can’t measure materially, but that we know from experience are real – things like love, loyalty, and friendship. It is not the practice of choosing to believe unproven things through force of will. True faith is more like trust, more like finding the ground upon which we can gain a growing sense of security that we belong in the universe and ultimately we will be okay. Faith is textured, intuitive, and testable in daily human life.

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, taught a similar approach to faith. For Kaplan, and for Rev. Borg as well, religious life helps us cultivate faith not through the literal reading of the stories of our religious traditions, but rather through opening ourselves to discovering the deeper meanings about life and the nature of Reality that religious stories are trying to express through the spiritual art form of myth. Both Christianity and Judaism present us with stories that teach that love really is a stronger power than death, and if we examine the nature of life, we can probe and test that proposition. Yes, death ends a human life, but the love connected to the person who has died carries on, and the goodness that emanates from the love that the deceased generated during their lifetime carries on as well.

Everything I've shared so far in this talk leads me to wonder: What do we, as Jews who embrace a progressive approach to religion, really believe in? And what kind of faith can we cultivate to help us survive and live meaningfully in these particularly scary times? Broadly speaking, many of us carry some ambivalence and uncertainty about how Judaism fits in our lives. This is true even for many rabbis, by the way. I realize that this Jewish community is a diverse group and of course on a person-by-person basis what I've just said may not be the case. There may be some members of String of Pearls who have cultivated an ever-deepening Jewish faith through increased traditional observance, study, mystical exploration, and prayer. And there may also be some in the community who have made a serious place for Judaism in their lives in other ways - through study, culture, cuisine, art, or experimental forms of Jewish practice. As a Reconstructionist rabbi, I am inspired by people who have found joy and meaning in making these various forms of "Jewishing" a central part of their lives.

That said, I think a majority of the liberal North American Jewish community is often uncertain and ambivalent about what they have faith in, or whether that's a word they would even want to use. And I think just about all of us have been scrambling to identify what feels "faith-worthy" - what bedrock beliefs and patterns we can count on - in this time of chaotic demagoguery, crumbling civility, and climate collapse. My question for us this Rosh Hashanah is "What do we really believe in?"

I didn't conduct a pre-High-Holy-Days survey of everyone who is here tonight, so my effort to answer that question is limited to being based on my observations. In Jewish tradition, it's considered a mitzvah to say "I could be wrong," so let me say it preemptively regarding what I'm about to say - "I could be wrong."

So, what do we believe in? Well, let me start by talking about some of the things we're actually not sure we believe. Most of us - for sure not all - but most of us are pretty uncertain about the role of

organized religion in our lives, Judaism included. And with notable exceptions, we're uncertain to fairly skeptical about many of the traditional beliefs of Judaism, such as: God revealed the Torah to Moses at Mt. Sinai amidst terrible thunder and smoke; God split the Sea for the Israelites when they fled Pharaoh; God commanded us to go out for Chinese food on Christmas – you know, the major traditional Jewish beliefs. Many of us are also uncertain about what it means to be Jewish, though we are here for Rosh Hashanah, and that tells me that even the more ambivalent among us sense that there's value in being Jewish.

A group like this also harbors many uncertainties about our connections to other parts of the Jewish people. In a liberal Jewish community, there's uncertainty about how we relate to the Orthodox. And there's uncertainty and conflictedness about our relationship to Israel.

When it comes to spirituality and the meaning of life, I assume that we are a group of people who want meaning in life. We want a connection with some kind of Higher Power, and we want to have a spiritual life that gives us more serenity, more comfort in our place in the universe, and more existential certainty in the face of the mysteries of death and loss. But, many of us are uncertain that a synagogue or havurah is a place that can help us with those spiritual yearnings.

This is a lot of uncertainty to cope with. Does anybody have an Ativan? – I feel like I'm about to have an anxiety attack.

Just kidding.

Look, even before the beginning of the recent wave of xenophobic and autocratic leaders started sweeping into power in different parts of the world, we were already living with tremendous cultural, technological, and political uncertainty. Throughout our lifetimes, and especially in the 21st century, the world has never changed at such a fast pace before in all of human history. That kind of change blows up worldviews that help people organize the sense of meaning in their lives and understand their place in the universe. Amidst this existential chaos, this vacuum of social consensus about what constitutes our framework of meaning, many people seek new solid ground, new certainty in different ways.

Some turn to fundamentalism or rigid ideologies. Unfortunately, many have turned to demagogues and reactionary politics. Some, and I include myself in this group, turn to approaches to religion that seek to identify traditional wisdom and combine it with creative new ideas, relying on instinct and feedback from others to point them towards truth. Some people avoid the issue entirely and dive into work, or even addiction. I have no crystal ball and can't offer you any predictions about whether this chaotic historical moment is a prelude to the end of the world or the dawning of the Age

of Aquarius. All I can tell you is that I still love the one-frame cartoon that I saw in the New Yorker several years ago. It's a picture of a raggedy man with a dirty beard standing on a busy New York street corner holding a sign that reads, "The world is not going to end. We will have to learn to cope."

So we're here, gathered together on Rosh Hashanah, trying to cope. Here we are, on this day of shofar blasts and ancient memory, on this day of apples and honey and moral self-examination. Here we are, in this beautiful sanctuary in a Unitarian community - a community premised on ideals of compassion, co-existence, cooperation, and non-dogmatism. Here we are, trying to cope.

Perhaps Rabbi Glazer's exercise can help us as a group figure out how to build the foundations of what I'll call for the moment, a plausible faith in a broken and uncertain world. What do we - this liberal Jewish sub-group of 21st Century North Americans - actually believe in? What are we certain about?

Well, here's what I see:

We are certain that we love our kids.

We are certain that none of us will live forever.

We are certain that life inevitably contains joy and suffering.

We are certain that justice is worth fighting for.

We are certain that cruelty is wrong.

We are certain that people have basic human rights.

We are certain that the laws of physics and natural science are real.

I think we are certain, as Miriam said, that there are other people who care.

A question I'd like to leave everyone with is: is this list of beliefs enough to begin to rebuild a foundation for a faith that can work for us? What I see as I consider this list is that our collective uncertainties about religion haven't stripped us of our certainty about the importance of working towards a sustainable world based on loving and just human relations. Thank God.

Another question I'd like to leave you with is: can Judaism help us? You can guess my bias on this one - I am a rabbi, after all. But if what I'm saying is right - if Mordecai Kaplan and Marcus Borg are right that real faith is built not on dogma but on testable propositions about the world - then the answer to the question of whether Judaism can help us is something each of us has to determine for ourselves.

I'll close with a couple thoughts about how I think Judaism can help, and I'm curious to hear from you what you think. My take is this: Jewish life - whether approached more traditionally or more experimentally - offers a framework of meaning that is rich enough mythically to satisfy the longing of the human spirit, and yet open-minded and inquisitive enough to make room for the unprecedented

flow of information, scientific discovery, and cross-cultural exposure that our internet-era society creates for us. I'm not talking about fundamentalist or intolerant expressions of Judaism here – these are some of the dangers that come with the religious territory. I'm talking about the Judaism that tells the story of a small and enslaved people who were liberated from a cruel fate, and then took their newfound freedom as a mandate to extend the principles of human dignity and social justice to all. That's our mythic story, and our God is the God who urges us to stand up to tyrants, to seek justice and pursue it. Our God proclaims that every human being is a reflection of God, and that love is stronger than cruelty.

I don't know if Moses really threw down his rod at Pharaoh's feet and had it magically turn into a snake, but I do know that before freedom can burst forth, somebody has to have had enough, and has to have the courage to risk their neck, walk up to the people in power, and throw down their rod in protest, even if it gets them killed.

I don't know if there really were 10 plagues that decimated Egypt, but I do know that societies that attack the vulnerable and harden their hearts to those seeking refuge at their gates start to plague themselves in horrible ways.

I don't know if the Red Sea really split, but I do know that the sea levels are rising, the polar ice caps are melting, and we are responsible for it and for doing our best to change course.

I have faith that there's something in the Divine will that wants the circle of human freedom to keep expanding until it includes everyone.

Judaism helps ground me and gives me a framework of meaning in this way.

We live in a transitional era, and we're stuck with its uncertainty. We have unparalleled personal freedom to seek out our own frameworks for meaning, our own spiritual communities, but with that freedom comes the ungrounded-ness of a clutter of competing worldviews and an ever changing social scene. I want to say to you tonight that in the midst of that uncertainty, progressive contemporary Judaism has something valuable to offer. A grounding mythic story and a tradition of questioning and debate that makes room for us to question or even reject parts of the myth without having to stop belonging.

On this Rosh Hashanah, the first of a series of 10 days that we dedicate to changing ourselves for the better, I ask you to spend some time talking with the people closest to you and sharing with each other the answer to the question, "What do I really believe in?," and I hope you are empowered by the answers you discover. I also ask you to honor your doubts and your deepest questions, in keeping with

the Jewish tradition of sacred questioning. There is nothing wrong with doubts. Any belief that is really just a repeated denial of a doubt is a belief standing on shaky legs. Doubts are invitations to explore a profound question with depth and honesty.

Finally, I ask you to consider bringing that whole bundle of beliefs, questions and doubts into this Jewish community, or, if you live far away, to another one like it. This community right here offers a sacred space where you can dialogue about your beliefs and doubts freely, and where you can test out the growing edges of belief within the warmth of Jewish community.

Thank you for listening, and *g'mar hatimah tovah* – may we all be sealed for a good year.