

**Believe It Or Not**  
**Yom Kippur**  
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A recent bestseller by Christopher Hitchens is entitled: *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The author claims that we'd be better off without any religion. He writes: "Religion has run out of justification. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important in the world."

On the other hand, a national survey released earlier this year by the Pew Research Center indicated that religion does matter. When asked which characteristics might help or hurt a Presidential candidate the most, 63% of the American public said they would be less likely to support a candidate who does not believe in God. Among Republicans, over 86% consider not believing in God a liability. Contrast that figure with the 46% who would be less likely to support a candidate who has no college education. And in case you wonder what particular form of belief in God, the survey tells us 39% of Americans would be more likely to support a Christian candidate. Among Republicans, 61%.

There has been this uneasy, often strident division between reason and faith, science and religion, as though acceptance of one means rejection of the other. There are the ardent atheists who have found a new and receptive audience, with best selling books, deriding religion as the source of war, terror and superstition. They see believers as naïve and dangerous.

On the other side, there are the fundamentalists, and their growing population of converts, also with best sellers, who read the Bible as a science textbook, a mandate to political power. They view atheism, humanism and secularism as the cause of immorality and depravity in the world.

History renders both of those positions false. The Crusades, the Inquisition, present day religious terrorism and oppression of women have more than demonstrated the dark side of religion. Communism, the regimes of Hitler and Stalin have shown us the sinister face of atheism.

You may think that atheists and religious fundamentalists are at opposite ends of the spectrum, but in fact, they share something essential in common. They both take religion literally, and in doing so they misconstrue and distort what it means to be religious.

Somewhere in the middle there are those who suggest that reason and faith are not at odds with each other, that science and religion are not opposing disciplines but rather different perspectives on life. Their books are not on the bestseller lists. As the voices on the extremes are becoming louder, it is time for the middle to find its voice.

In Cold War America, atheism meant communism. God was part of the arsenal to fight the great enemy. So in 1954 a law was passed changing the national motto of the U.S. from “E Pluribus Unum” (From the many – one) to “In God We Trust,”; in 1956 the words- “under God” were added to the Pledge of Allegiance. We were then in a cold war with the Soviet Union. But now, atheism is no longer our enemy, religious fundamentalism is.

This religious resurgence has surprised us. With urbanization, science, technology and education, we assumed that religious fanaticism was a relic of the past. We were wrong. Here we are in the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggling with conflicts of competing revelations and divine mandates, the very issues that occupied the world in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

We once posited God as our weapon of choice against communism. But if you think, therefore, that atheism might a good weapon to fight religious fanaticism, think again. History teaches us that there is a great human yearning for religion, a deep desire to believe.

What is the voice in the middle between strident atheism and religious fanaticism? Over the summer I read a book entitled, *Doubt, A History*, by Jennifer Hecht. I am pleased that Ms. Hecht will be speaking at one of our Adult Education programs. She suggests that looking at the history of doubt might just help us find that middle voice. She writes that only after there was a culture of doubt was there the kind of active believing which is at the center of modern faiths. In truth, Judaism has been defined less by believing than by behaving and belonging. We were a people before we had a faith. Only in the United States, since the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, when Judaism sought to fit into the religious framework of America, have issues of belief risen to prominence.

The early teachers of Judaism, the Pharisees, helped to define Judaism through doubt’s questions. They read the Bible and had misgivings about some of its claims. Following in the tradition of Greek rationalism, they translated Torah into the real world of their day; they used reason to allow tradition to evolve.

Even earlier, sometime between 600 and 400 BCE, someone took an ancient near-Eastern folk story about suffering and faith and transformed it into a narrative about doubt. It became the book of Job. The Biblical author reimagined the ancient tale as a story of belief pushed past its limits, into anger, revolt and doubt. Job is the quintessential tale of *chutzpa* before God. In the pre-Israelite folktale, Job suffers quietly, waiting faithfully until God shows up and gives him riches, new loved ones and a long life. But the biblical Job is not so resigned. He reacts to his friends’ insistence that God is good and just and has the power to prevent his terrible circumstances. Job questions this traditional notion of reward and punishment.

God’s response is to cite the mysteries of the universe, but never suggests that all will be made right in the afterlife. In the Bible, there is no afterlife. This life is all we have, and it is often blatantly unfair. Job decides that despite it all, there is a God! Job is a sacred text, but it is also a parable of doubt, of *chutzpa*. The philosopher Walter

Kaufman taught: “The only theism worthy of our respect believes in God not because of the way the world is made, but in spite of it.”

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Moses Maimonides, one of Judaism’s defining philosophers, argued that when ancient information, whether from Aristotle or Jewish tradition, is contradicted by the growth of a scientific discipline, the ancient information must be discarded in favor of new truth. Maimonides spoke against astrology, which saw the future in the stars, despite the fact that many Talmudic sages endorsed it. He wrote: “It is not proper to abandon knowledge that has been verified by proof...A man should never cast reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back.”

Maimonides did not believe in a God who could speak and act. He rejected the descriptions of God in human form and claimed that nothing could be said about God – nothing at all. The most that we could do is say “what God is not.”

Moses Mendelsohn, whose thought eventually helped to shape modern Judaism, taught: “Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic law, there is not a single one which says: You shall believe or not believe. They all say: You shall do or not do. Nowhere does it say: Believe O Israel; do not doubt, .... Belief and doubt are not determined by our faculty of desire... but by our knowledge of truth and untruth.”

Judaism embraced a tradition that in the words of Emily Dickenson –“doubts as fervently as it believes.” There is more than humor behind the assertion that a Jew answers every question with another question.

Thanks to the telescope, the microscope and MRIs that image the brain, we have more knowledge about the universe and ourselves. But there are some questions that even these tools cannot answer. Why did my loved one die? Why must I battle this illness? Why did this tragedy happen to me? We might think for a moment that the best answer to these questions should have the word God in it. It doesn’t. Sometimes – “I don’t know” – is the best answer. It recognizes that there is no good reason; it isn’t fair; and then it offers the best response – an understanding and caring presence.

Assuming that there must be a good reason for human suffering is not only bad psychology but bad theology. What kind of God would let evildoers flourish and cause untold anguish, illness and death to innocent children, good men and women? What kind of God would send earthquakes and hurricanes, cause coal mines to collapse and bridges to fail during rush hour traffic? Certainly not a God I could believe in. Not one many of our ancestors believed in either.

In the popular hymn Yigdal, we sing about God sending a messiah to usher the end days. Yet the rabbis teach that if you are planting a tree and someone tells you that the messiah has come, first finish planting the tree. An Israeli hit tune of 2001 was called –*The Messiah Is Not Coming – and He’s Not Even Going to Call*. Judaism embraces “doubts as firmly as it believes”.

In what do I believe? I believe in acts of compassion and deeds of lovingkindness and I call them godly. I've witnessed extraordinary courage in the face of tremendous trial, and I can't imagine from where it comes. I call that place – God. I've observed hope triumph over fear and despair and I call that hope – divine. I've glimpsed people wrestle joy and laughter from the midst of difficulty and I name that joy – holy. I've watched people struggle for right when everything conspires against the right, and I call that impulse to righteousness – sacred. I believe that justice, compassion, and forgiveness are godly, and we are its agents and vessels.

When Charles Darwin was asked at the end of his life, what was his most extraordinary experience, he answered: the rainforest. “No one can stand in the solitude unmoved and not feel that there is more in man than the mere breath in his body.” But it is not just the rainforest that evokes such reverence. I feel it every time I stand with a bride and groom under the *huppah*, watch parents pronounce the name of their new baby, or hear them speak to their emerging adolescent at a Bar/Bat Mitzvah. I know that birth is a biological event, but when I held my new grandson in my arms and listened to the rhythm of his heart and breath, watched his brow wrinkle and his mouth open in a yawn, I felt the holy intersect with the mundane.

I don't believe that some supernatural force intervenes in the laws of nature. But I would call each of these extraordinarily ordinary moments – miracles – not because they contrary to nature but because they are wonders of nature. No one can stand in these moments unmoved and not feel that there is more to man and woman than the mere breath in their bodies.

A third grade class at the synagogue wanted to know what God looked liked – whether God had eyes and hands and feet like their own. I told them a story about two people whose hands helped one another. Then I asked the children to raise their hands. I looked out at this group of 8 year olds with their hands waving enthusiastically in the air, and I said – “your hands and your hands are the hands of God.”

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a disciple of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, puts it bluntly: “I believe in Godliness, but I do not believe in God as a person. When I suffer, who comforts me? Who consoles me? You do. My people do. Does God console and comfort me? The answer is yes. Through you.”

Our High Holy Day liturgy envisions God as a King who sits on high – *Melech El Yoshev al kisa ram v'nisa*, a God who writes and seals our fate in the book of life. But Jewish philosophers throughout the centuries have asked us to take those descriptions not as a literal picture of an old man in the heavens determining our future, but as poetic metaphor.

A recent New York Times article about physics and the God particle lamented: “It's just too bad that name (God) has been tainted and trivialized by association with the image of a white-bearded Caucasian-looking creature who sits in the clouds attended by harp-strumming angels.” Job's holier-than-thou friends sought to be defenders of that

kind of God. But Job silenced his friends' theological cruelty and personal insensitivity. He questioned such a notion of God, and the Bible agreed with Job. There is an old Yiddish proverb that expresses more than anything else the feeling of the folk: "If God lived in our neighborhood, people would break His windows".

So if you are sitting in this sanctuary and you question whether there is a God who actually listens and answers prayers, who rewards the good and punishes the wicked; if you do not believe in an afterlife as a place with white robes and harp music, you are in good Jewish company. A nationwide survey found that while 76% of Protestants and 64% of Catholics were certain there was a God, only 30% of Jews felt the same. If you are among the 70%, you don't need to reject all faith because of the way some people have trivialized and distorted what it means to be religious. Find the middle voice.

Religion offers us something precious. It gives us the poetry, the drama and ritual that help us journey through life. When we despair, feel all alone in our suffering, Judaism gives us community. When we are bereft, when grief overwhelms, Judaism gives us words – *kaddish*. When we are moved by a deep joy that language is not large enough to contain, Judaism gives us speech – *sheheheyanu*. The comedian, Henny Youngman quipped – "I wanted to become an atheist, but I gave up. They have no holidays."

A personal ad which appeared in an Israeli paper read: "Divorced Jewish man, seeks partner to attend shul, light Shabbos candles, celebrate holidays, build Sukkah together, attend brisses, bar mitzvahs. Religion not important." The fact is that regardless of whether we think of ourselves as religious not, we need to mark our calendars with sacred time; we yearn for community to embrace us and ritual to hold us together when life falls apart.

I recall some time ago working on a special project with a professor at a nearby university. She called to tell me that she would have to cancel our meeting because her mother had just died. I asked when the funeral would be. She told me that there would be no funeral, no ritual – she didn't believe in religion. One month later, I received a call from her. She said, "Tell me what I can do, I need to say goodbye." You can't find that answer by looking through a microscope.

A distraught parent once told me that her son no longer wanted to come to synagogue because he didn't believe in God. I responded, "Tell him: what really matters is to discover what it is that you do believe in, and the synagogue is a better place than most to do just that."

What is it that we believe? What drives us? What matters? How do we make sense of the world? What is worthy of our devotion? The synagogue is a better place than most to look for the answers. Let us not reject religion because of what some have done to co-opt and misrepresent what it means to be a religious person. Let us find the middle voice of a faith that can sustain our world and us in the year ahead.