

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5774
Authenticity and Integrity

Sometimes, I find, it is difficult to know ourselves and what it is we should be doing in the world.

*I once met a man whose first job was working in an orange juice factory,
but he got canned ... because he couldn't concentrate.*

*Then he worked in the woods as a lumberjack,
Found he couldn't hack it ... so they gave him the axe.*

*After that he tried to be a tailor,
but he just wasn't suited for it ... it was only a so-so job.*

*He wanted to be a barber,
but he couldn't cut it.*

*He tried to be a chef,
figuring it would add spice to his life, but he just didn't have the thyme.*

*He did study a long time to become a doctor,
Found he didn't have any patients.*

*He managed to get a job as a pool man,
but he decided the work was too draining.*

*So then he got a job at a gym,
but it turned out he wasn't fit for it.*

*He considered becoming an historian,
until he realized there was no future in it.*

SO HE RETIRED, AND HE FOUND HE WAS A PERFECT FIT THAT JOB!

I apologize for the puns.

Still I cannot help but love the joke-teller's grappling with questions like who is he? and what should he be doing with his life?

The line of questioning resonates deeply within me, particularly this time of year.

It is after all the season of *teshuvah*, of turning, returning to God... to Jewish values... to human values... to our best selves. Are we living with authenticity and integrity?

Authenticity and integrity come from aligning our actions with our values. We are called, this time of year, to check our moral compasses and redirect our behavior accordingly.

A sin in Judaism is called a *chet*, an arrow. When that *chet*, or arrow misses the bulls-eye we have to adjust our grasp on the bow's handle, the tension with which we pull the string, and our aim through the sight window. A little adjustment can make a big difference.

Steven Covey, in his classic book on leadership, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, begins by reminding us that from the time an airplane takes off and lands, pilots and air traffic controllers negotiate multiple changes in the flight plan. Weather systems, turbulence, and other aircraft get in the way and the pilot has to re-adjust. Still, almost always, the plane lands where it is supposed to land. It reaches its intended destination.

Teshuvah – the returning to core values – only works if we know what those core values are, that is, if we know where it is in life that we are going. Life can keep us so busy that we lose sight of our destination. We need to regularly recalibrate our inner compasses.

It is said that the famous kabbalist, Rabbi Isaac Luria, once heard the voice of God telling him that for all his prayerful intensity there was one man in a neighboring town whose capacity for prayer exceeded even his own. Rabbi Luria immediately set out to find this man.

Once he found the man he inquired, "I have heard wondrous things about you, are you a Torah scholar?"

"No," the man said, "I have never had the opportunity to study."

"Then you must be a master of Psalms, a devotional genius who prays with great intensity."

"No," the man said. "I have heard the Psalms many times, but I don't know a single one well enough to recite it."

“And yet,” Rabbi Luria cried, “I was told that the quality of your prayer surpasses even my own! What did you do during the Days of Awe that would merit such praise?”

“Rabbi,” the man said, “I am illiterate. Of the twenty-two letters of the alef-bet I know only ten. When I entered the synagogue and saw the congregation so fervent in their prayers, my heart shattered within me. I couldn’t pray at all.

So I said: God, here are the letters I know: alef bet gimmel dalet hay vav zayin chet tet yud. Combine them so that You understand them, and I hope they will be pleasing to You. Then I repeated these ten letters over and over again, trusting God to weave them into prayers.

Rabbi Luria was embarrassed. No matter how learned the man or how sophisticated the prayer, the primary goal is to reach God, not to be the best at praying.

And so we are, this Erev Rosh Hashanah, in synagogue praying to God, trying to reach God. But what does it mean?

We modern Jews like to say that we reach God by living a good life, being kind to people, seeking justice and fairness.

But we are not doing this seeking in a soup kitchen, in a courtroom, or a philosopher’s study. We are in synagogue.

And the truth of the matter is very few of us have an idea of what God is. I would even venture to say that very few of us really believe in God.

We come to Temple Beth Tikvah to find Jewish community. And it’s a beautiful – friendly – welcoming community. The music is gorgeous and allows us to meditate and think. The Hebrew masks the language of the prayers so we don’t really have to confront them.

Yet not having come to terms with God, our authenticity is compromised. I understand that it is difficult to talk about God. It feels archaic and irrelevant.

I would further suggest that occasionally praying to a God we find irrelevant is the exact opposite of being authentic and furthermore is the reason synagogues are failing to attract and keep Jews close.

There is a great story told about Mahatma Gandhi:

Gandhi was approached by a woman who was very concerned that her son consumed too much sugar, and was worried about his health. She asked

Gandhi to tell the child about the harmful effects of sugar in the hope that he would listen and stop eating it.

Gandhi was happy to assist, but asked the woman to return with her son in two weeks and not before.

Two weeks passed and the woman and her son came to Gandhi. The sage spoke with the boy, and recommended that he stop eating sugar. The boy agreed, and the mother was extremely grateful.

*“But why,” she asked, “did you insist on the two-week period of waiting?”
“Because,” replied Gandhi, “I needed the two weeks to stop eating sugar myself.”*

Authenticity is everything. Our lack of authenticity with regard to our faith creates a disconnect between what happens here in this sanctuary and out there in life. We know it. And our children know it too.

The language we have for talking about God is ancient. It is poetry, and I believe, totally open to reinterpretation. Unfortunately, for too many generations we have not engaged in the act of re-interpreting. We are stuck with a tradition that our rational minds cannot accept.

I, personally, find it very difficult to engage in conversations about God. Not because I don't believe. Not because I don't know how to explain what I believe. But because it requires time and re-education.

All the language we have: Father, King, Parent, Sovereign, master of the universe, judge and arbiter, creator, merciful one... All of these names for God are euphemisms for an outdated mode of describing God.

They all presuppose that God is outside the universe, acting on the universe at will. Choosing to do this or cause that. The ancients understood God in this manner. We don't have to.

Fortunately we know more than the ancients about how the universe works, how the human body and mind work. We have pre-history and history to look back upon and draw lessons. Our understanding about everything has changed, except God.

Take for instance God's name. In the Torah we find the four-lettered name of God, YHWH. Only the High Priest was allowed to pronounce the name of God, and only on Yom Kippur. The rabbis of the 10th century, needing to make the name pronounceable so that we could read it when we read Torah decided to replace it with the word Adonai, Lord.

Now the name YHWH contains root letters of a very common Hebrew word – HWH, the verb “to be.” The initial Y indicates that the verb is in an imperfect grammatical. YHWH is not in a present, past, or future tense. It is open to them all depending on context.

That which was, that which is, that which will be. This is the name of God. I’ll use the term “Being” as a nickname. It’s easier to say.

Already without even turning to philosophers and theologians, the very concept of God is totally transformed into something other than an outside force that willfully acts upon us and the universe. Consider the difference between “Lord” and “Being.”

We turn now to the teachings of Rabbi Arthur Green, whom I believe might be the most important Jewish theologian today. He writes in his book, *Radical Judaism*, that his...*theological position is that of a mystical panentheist, one who believes that God is present throughout all of existence.*

Panentheism is different than pantheism. In pantheism everything in the universe is part of God. In panentheism God lies within everything in the universe and beyond.

Art Green teaches: *Being or YHWH underlies and unifies all that is. At the same time this whole is mysteriously and infinitely greater than the sum of its parts...*

We know this intuitively when we find ourselves in awe of a beautiful sunset despite our knowledge that it is caused by pollution or smoke from fires. We know this intuitively when we call the birth of a child a miracle when we know exactly where babies come from.

Coming into contact with God, YHWH, is less communication and more noticing. Being present in a moment, shedding away the veils of our worries and expectations, opening deeper levels of our minds...these are the pathways to the divine. They require no leap of faith, no magic, no superstition.

Art Green argues: *The radical otherness of God, so insisted upon by Western theology, is not an ontological otherness (an otherness in form and structure) but rather an otherness of perspective...it is the same reality that is being viewed...theology is an art, not a science.*

We people of faith have nothing we can prove; attempts to do so only diminish what we have to offer. We can only testify, never prove. Our strength lies in grandeur of vision...

Our vision does not have to be correct for all time. Judaism has always been subject to change and evolutionary process. Once we sacrificed animals. Once we asked a High Priest to intercede on our behalf. Then rabbis shifted our focus from the Temple in Jerusalem to Torah. The *maskilim*, the scholars who participated in the Jewish enlightenment of the 19th century, introduced science and literary criticism, creating space for an intellectually acceptable Judaism.

Reform Judaism emerged. Orthodoxy traded its flexibility in for continuity. And it's just too soon to know what will take shape.

We can only testify, never prove.

Our responsibility is to seek and talk about what we find. Match it against our history and our sacred literature, and for that matter, other faith traditions. It is never to simply believe or pretend we believe.

Evolutionary process occurs in geologic time. What I mean to say is that no single generation completes significant mutation or permanent change. It takes thousands of years. All we can do is lean in the direction we'd like to see things go.

I'd like to see Jewish tradition continue to evolve. In order for that to happen we need to stay in the game of interpreting and reinterpreting.

Walking away is like leaning in the direction of extinction. So is ignoring the pink elephant in the room – the religious part of Judaism, God.

While the reason for gathering with the folks from Temple Beth Tikvah may be the company, the truth is that our founders founded a synagogue and not a coffeehouse. Something in us can't walk away. Something in us chooses to stay within the fold, even if we aren't sure what that means.

Rosh Hashanah is the time during which we begin our *teshuvah*, our return, our return to God, YHWH, all that was – all that is – all that will be. It is the time of year during which our tradition calls on us to reflect and consider. My prayer is that, this year, we do it, and we do it honestly, with all our heart, but also with all our intellect.

How do we relate to God? How do we relate to the here and now? What works best? Prayer? Study? A hike? Being with the people we love? Being alone? Different modes for different times?

Remember, *we can only testify, never prove*. What is **your** experience? What is **your** testimony? In the words of Michael Meyer's Saturday Night Live character, Linda Richman, "Talk amongst yourselves..." Discuss it with your loved ones. Attend a Torah study or an adult ed. Read a book. Watch a movie. Reflect and discuss... engage and participate... Be honest and authentic. This year, and every year, seek integrity in all aspects of life, and in faith. Amen.