

WHY BELIEVE? SERMON FOR ROSH HASHANAH EVENING – 5773/2012

Last April, a group of local clergy sat around a lunch table at the First Baptist Church on Ocean Drive. We gather once a month, and the only agenda for our sessions is that there is no agenda; we deliberately conduct no business so that we can merely talk with each other, come to trust each other and then share personal and professional concerns. A question arose during our discussions: What religious issue troubles you most? What theological or spiritual question gives you more to think about, more to worry about than any other?

Each of the clergy had his own answer. Some worried about secularism; others were concerned about the aging of the congregation or about those who never attend services. There was some discussion about whether religion had anything to say about social values, given what some feel is a general breakdown in the ethical and moral standards of society.

As a Jew, I had a different answer. I said that the most problematic aspect of being someone involved with religion is God. “God?!” one of the others blurted out. “How can God be a problem for a religious person?”

I gave my colleagues a short answer. For you, I want to say a bit more, fill in the gaps, so to speak. So, let us start with the classic Jewish tradition. You may know the word MASHGIACH, supervisor. This is a person who oversees the preparation of kosher food, from the time that the crops are harvested and the animals sent to the slaughter house to the time that it turns up on the restaurant table or in your own kitchen. The word MASHGIACH is related to another Hebrew word, HASHGACHAH, and in the context of classical Jewish theology, this means “divine providence,” God’s care and concern both for the creation as a whole and for every individual within it. According to our long tradition, God oversees and is involved with every aspect of the world. The prophet Zephaniah (4:10) tells us that “the eyes of the Lord range through the whole earth.” In later Talmudic literature (Hullin 7b), we are taught that “a man does not even strike a finger here below unless it is decreed on high,” and in a parallel midrashic statement we learn that “a snake never bites, a lion never rends, a government never interferes unless so ordered from above.” (Ecclesiastes Rabba 10:11:1)

In other words, from of old Judaism has taught that God is involved in the specific activities of human life. Virtually everything that we do is part of God’s economy, part of God’s plan, and overseen by God directly. My Christian colleagues understood this idea from the 1905 Gospel

hymn refrain that holds “His eye is on the sparrow and I know He watches me.”

For a modern Jew, this idea is a very difficult one to accept. Not, to be sure, because of our egos. We are victims of an exaggerated sense of pride in which we claim that we are totally independent of any outside influence, that what we do is of our own devising and that neither God nor society or, often, even other people influence our daily acts. But I don't think that this excessive sense of personal responsibility is really at the root of our problem with HASHGACHAH, with divine involvement in human events. No. I think it's something more recent and more specific than the general tenor of our insistence that we, ourselves, are solely responsible for what we do.

From 1933 to 1945, the Nazi regime in Germany and their allies and collaborators in other countries of Europe slaughtered six million of the world's Jews – and five million others – political opponents, military officers of conquered nations, journalists, homosexuals, artists of various sorts and just about anyone else who could be styled “an enemy of the state.” One-third of the Jewish population of the world was wiped out by the systematic slaughter perpetrated by the genocidal monsters during what we have come to know as the Holocaust. Among the Jewish victims of this mass murder, fully a quarter, twenty-five percent, a million and a half were children under the age of thirteen. On Yom HaShoah this last Spring, a class of students at Texas A&M University and members of the community gathered on the campus and recited the names and ages of as many of these children as they could. As I listened to their recital, the numbing drone of name after name, of child after child whose future was stolen by sadists and perverts, my heart was almost wrenched from my chest. It was hard to breathe and even harder to respond with words to summarize what they had, hour after hour, memorialized.

Here's the question: How could something like this happen, if there is a God who is concerned about the specifics of human activity? If divine providence and intervention is a reality, then why was the slaughter of these children permitted to happen at all? If God is able to make a difference in human affairs, was this not the circumstance that most demanded that God, literally, step in and stop the massacre? Where, indeed, was God at Auschwitz and at Treblinka and at Sobibor and at Maidanek and at Dachau and at Mauthausen and at all the other camps where Jews and their children were mercilessly killed? If God can make a difference in the specific events of human life, why not during the Nazi horror? And if God cannot make that difference – or wills not to make that difference – then why believe in God at all?

My Christian friends began to understand why I am troubled by God. They also understood that what I was talking about what not just a Jewish issue. Any person involved in traditional western religious is affected. It is hard, in the aftermath of the Holocaust, to be a traditional theist, to believe in the same kind of God that one could believe in, even during the 1920s and early 1930s. The Holocaust was a watershed event for Jewish and Christian theology, although it is much more powerful as an influence for us than for them. After all, our family members, our relatives, our children, our Jewish brothers and sisters were those who were chosen to be

gassed and shot and incinerated; for Christians, the victims were always “the other,” someone with whom they had no intimate personal connections. The issue for them is largely objective and abstract, whereas for us it is visceral and intense. They can put it on the shelf and deal with it on occasion; for us, the Holocaust is transformative, a life-changing event that affects everything we do and every day of our lives.

I understand why it is hard to believe. Many of you probably have the same questions and doubts that I have. So I want to tell you briefly why I still believe in God.

A few months ago, the columnist Anna Quindlen was on NPR radio. She had been raised in a very fervent Catholic environment, but recent developments within the Catholic Church caused her to question her religion. No longer a member of the Catholic Church, Anna said that, while she had lost her religion, she had not lost her faith. She could not be an atheist, she said, because that involved making a commitment to the non-existence of God based on evidence she did not have. So, she has decided that the right stance for her is agnosticism – doubt, but also hopeful faith.

I find myself in much the same position. I cannot be sure whether God exists or not, and if God does exist, what role the deity might play in human life. Still, I find it necessary for my own spiritual life to believe. My favorite congregational name in all the world is a Reform congregation in a suburb of Buenos Aires, Argentina. It was founded by German Jews who fled the Nazis in the 1930s and who were joined by Holocaust survivors after the war. They named their synagogue LAMROT HAKOL, which means “In Spite of Everything.” Some people might say that it is a juvenile fantasy or a psychological delusion, but I find myself incapable of living without a basis in faith. God may be difficult, but God won’t get rid of me that easily!

Here’s a second reason why I believe. The great Christian theologian, Paul Tillich, once wrote that God is the source of ethics and morality. One need only read the prophets of biblical Israel to understand how right he was. These spiritual and religious giants wrote inspiring words based on what they believed God had told them, based on what they understood God to want humans – and Jews, especially – to do. The exalted messages of the prophets tell us that the words “good” and “God” are inextricably linked. For them, the godly life was a life of doing good. I don’t think we’ve ever improved on that.

Now I know that many people will say that terrible things have been done in the name of religion – wars, inquisition, persecution, all sorts of malicious and dastardly acts. The metal belt buckle of the Wehrmacht had the legend, GOTT MIT UNS, “God is with us.” People who voice this accusation are right, of course. Over the centuries, people have perverted the true message of God, as it is filtered through human religious institutions, and acted in ways that completely contradict the essential values for which religion stands.

But I want you simply now to look to your right and to your left, around this room at the people who are here. I do not see any monsters, any evil doers, any horrible examples of the worst that humanity can produce. Rather, I know that you are good people – not perfect, because, after all, we're human – but good and striving to become better. And if I go to the supermarket or to the Hooks' games or look at my students at the university – wherever I go, wherever I look, I see pretty decent and righteous human beings, people who sometimes make mistakes but who, for the most part, are good and godly folks. My informal study of human history is that our age is no different from most ages in the past. Yes, there were perverse and evil people; there were people who murdered, but far more who took the commandment seriously and did not kill each other. For the most part, people are good. And that goodness is a direct result of the values that believing in God has taught us. I believe in God because that belief helps us craft a society in which goodness and righteousness can triumph over their opposites. There is, to be sure, evil enough in this world to break the heart; but there is also enough good to exalt the soul. I believe that good people and good deeds come from a belief in a good and righteous God.

I have faith because my life's experience teaches me that the universe and those who populate it are predictable. To be sure, there are no guarantees; life is often an adventure. Nature is sometimes surprising, and human beings will do the unexpected. But, at base, I have come to trust in a substantial degree of predictable probability. The Psalmist wrote (121:6-7) that "the sun shall not smite you by day nor the moon by night. The Lord...shall guard your soul." And so I rise confidently each morning to greet a new, sun-filled day and bid farewell every night to a luminescent moon. A similar expectation is largely borne out in human nature. I trust, I have faith because experience has taught me that stability inheres among us: there is more love than hate, there is more good than evil, there is more right than wrong, there is more decency and more kindness than their opposites. Seventy-three and a-half years of living have led me to an optimistic faith; it is the bedrock in which I trust.

I believe in God because, at least in the name of God, we have a road map of how to get from where we are now to where we would like to be in the future. All of us, I suspect, would agree that the world we presently inhabit is hardly an ideal world. There is plenty of good, but there is also copious bad. There are wars and hatred, racism and ageism and sexism, dubious acts of mischief and devious ethical misdeeds. How shall we move our world toward goodness, unless we know something of the ideal world that we would seek? And from where do we see glimmers of this ideal? From God and from God's Torah, which provides us with values and directions to move from our present unhappy state to a better world. The vision of what is better comes from God. Without it, we would have no idea of how to navigate the twists and turns of earthly existence in our pursuit of a much finer and better life.

And, finally, I believe in God because God gives meaning and purpose to my life – to all human life. Without the inspiration of a divinely-based messianic covenant, where would a human being go and to what ends would we exert our efforts? To be God's partners in TIKKUN OLAM is to make cosmic sense of our lives; without that organizing principle, human life is, literally, absurd.

Why do I believe in God? Why do I persist in faith? Very simply, because I cannot conceive a

rich and meaningful life without such belief and without trust and faith. On this Rosh HaShanah, I hope you will spend a few moments – or maybe more – asking yourself the same question. Why believe? Or, perhaps, why not?

AMEN