

## ***The Sin of Certainty***

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Yom Kippur is upon us. Our holiest of holy days. One single solitary day focused largely on a word that we rarely use anymore in our every day conversations. Yom Kippur is a day that we focus upon our sins. Your sins, my sins, our sins. In case we are oblivious, the prayerbook reminds us of the specifics. The traditional liturgy gives us a litany of sins – *al cheyt sh'chatanu*, for the sins we have committed of immorality, gossip, deception, adultery, stealing, cheating, impatience, anger, abuse, disrespect, evil. It is a long and harsh list. And this year I feel compelled to add to the list, for I believe that in this year more than any other we are guilty of another sin, the sin of certainty. *Al cheyt sh'chatanu lifanecha*, O God, for the sin of תַּיִתּוּן, the sin of certainty.

Part of the deterioration of our public discourse is rooted in the sin of certainty. I know what is right and you are wrong. To confirm that I am the one who knows what is right, I listen only to news shows that support my point of view, I read facebook posts that come only from my friends. In fact, if my facebook friend says something that offends me, I unfriend him, I unfriend her. The sin of certainty is not just committed by individuals. It is global. And rampant. The terrorism and fundamentalism that plague our world are rooted in the sin of certainty. My God is right. My viewpoint is Truth with a capital "T." The inability of Congress to pass legislation is rooted in the sin of certainty. No room for compromise. I am right and you are wrong. I am not budging and I am not listening, because I know the answer. Racism and anti-Semitism, both on the rise in our country today, are rooted in the sin of certainty. No room for learning about others, about accepting the possibility that someone else's experience is rooted in reality. Black and White. It is that simple.

Seems that the more complex the problems in the world have become, the simpler the solutions that are offered. The war in Syria? We have the greatest military in the world. We should just solve it. ISIS? Get rid of them. Immigration? Don't let anyone in. Let everyone in.

As our world gets more complicated, we are more tempted by the lure of simple answers. Whether it is how to fight terrorism, or how to lose weight, how to express our patriotism for our United States of America, or how to show our love for the Holy Land of Israel, we are seduced by simple answers and too quick to come to hard and fast judgments.

How tragic that so much violence is perpetrated in the name of religion. What makes a religion worthy? Not that it claims to have the truth; that is the sin of certainty; rather that it *seeks* the truth. A worthy religion is about the art of pondering the most important questions of life itself, and yet religion today is the engine of fundamentalism and the inspiration for terrorism. Religion at its best is a purposefully nebulous arena whose focus is to explore those wonders of life that are, by definition, all mystery and unknowable. And yet somehow we are all guilty of thinking that religion is in the business of telling us what to do and what to believe.

Sadly, faith itself has been reduced to “yes or no” answers. ‘Do you believe in God?’ Yes or no. ‘Do you practice your religion?’ Yes or no. ‘Are you a good Jew or a bad Jew?’ Yes or no. Those are all the wrong answers because they begin with the wrong questions. We need fewer “yes or no” questions on the exam of life, and more multiple choice, or better yet, long essays. Questions like: When you are afraid, what gives you strength? When acts of kindness make you cry, why is that? Where does the capacity to love come from?

Sitting here in services this evening, I know there are a lot of people who are unsure about what they believe. That is why our machzor clearly states: “If you can’t find the faith, then doubt is your gift.” (*Mishkan HaNefesh for RH*) Our Shabbat prayerbook reminds us when we pray to God: “YOU ARE WITH US in our prayer, our love and our doubt.” (*Mishkan T’filah*)

Unfortunately, instead of celebrating the realm of the unknown – which is religion at its best – religion is invoked to proclaim certitude of that which is unknowable: what happens after we die, who gets to merit heaven, who should live and who should die.

The world is more complicated than that, the choices before us are not always easy or even apparent and now more than ever we must recommit to our Jewish values of learning and exploring and questioning and challenging. Asking questions is an ancient Jewish tradition. Open the Torah and start reading from the beginning. God’s very first communication to human beings is in the form of a question. God asks Adam: “*Ayeka*, Where are you?” Just a few chapters later, it is Abraham who dares to question God at Sodom and Gemora: “Shall not the Judge of all life deal justly?” In the Talmud, Rabbi Shmuel ben Nahman proclaims: “One who is not ashamed to ask will in the end be exalted.” And then there is Izzy.

Izzy, who is most famous for being a Nobel Prize-winning scientist, was once asked, “Why did you become a scientist, rather than a doctor or lawyer or a businessman, like the other kids in your neighborhood?” Izzy’s response: “My mother made me a scientist without ever intending it. Every other Jewish mother in Brooklyn would ask her child after school: ‘So? What did you learn today?’”

But not my mother. She always asked me a different question. 'Izzy,' she would say, 'did you ask a good question today?' That made all the difference."

Asking good questions helps us from falling into the sinful trap of certainty. How we choose to answer the questions also reveals a lot about ourselves and sets us on a course for the future. Just as the year ahead is sure to be filled with life and death, with good and evil, it is also sure to be filled with questions and answers, with choices we will need to make, with decisions, with alternatives that, depending on our own actions, will take us down radically different paths. Sometimes the choices are easy; sometimes they are hard. Why is it that the right choice is often the hardest choice to make? Wouldn't it be nice if making the right choice were the easiest choice? What is it about human nature that sometimes draws us to make the choice we know we should avoid?

I think of that famous Alka Seltzer commercial. A middle-aged man walks up to the deli counter and orders a pastrami sandwich with a shmeer of chopped liver. The young fellow behind the counter dutifully makes the sandwich and as he passes it to the customer, he says kindly: "You're making a big mistake."

Spare us, O God, from making those big mistakes. How many temptations lie before us. We are tempted by laziness; we are tempted by lust. We are tempted by cynicism; we are tempted by chocolate. We are tempted by materialism; we are tempted by jealousies. Of all the temptations we face, I believe that as 5776 turns into 5777, the greatest temptation in our culture today is the temptation of the simple answer, or as Ralph Waldo Emerson would put it, that 'foolish consistency which is the hobgoblin of little minds' which is to say, the sin of certainty.

Many of the most important issues of our day are complicated issues that don't have a single right or wrong answer. We have seen in our country an ugly spike in racial and racist violence. The violent shootings of unarmed black men has led to the emergence of Black Lives Matter and the Movement for Black Lives, which have created a piercing call, like the call of the shofar, to respond to the virulent anti-Black racism that permeates our society.

We Jews, who were slaves in Egypt, know that we must answer that call to end racism in our society. There is nothing complicated about that. But what do we do when the Movement for Black Lives puts out a Platform Statement that not only calls for an end to racism in the United States, but falsely conflates the struggle of Black people in America with the struggle of Palestinians in Israel, Gaza and the West Bank, and uses words like 'genocide' and 'apartheid' to describe Israeli policies. How can we work with a Movement like that? But how can we abandon the movement that is a major voice in the efforts to come to terms with the racism that permeates our society?

Anti-Israel rhetoric in the Movement for Black Lives platform is especially troubling because it sets up a false dichotomy:

you are either against racism or you are pro-Israel. We refuse to choose. We are against racism and proudly Zionist. Rabbi Jonah Pessner, the director of the Reform Movement's Religious Action Center in Washington, D.C., has stated clearly: "We reject wholeheartedly the notion that effective anti-racism work can only be done by denouncing and excoriating Israel." At the same time, he reminds us: *'The Reform Movement is committed to advancing civil rights and racial justice, including ensuring that black lives matter in all aspects of our society, from the criminal justice system to the voting booth and beyond. We will continue to work in relationship across lines of race, faith and class to dismantle structural racism and build a more just and equitable society.'*

*Gam zeh v' gam zeh*, we say in Hebrew: this is true and this is true. *Gam zeh v' gam zeh*. Also this and also that. It is not so simple.

But ambiguity is beyond our comfort zone. We prefer certain answers to complex questions. The desire to have the answer becomes stronger than the search for the answer. We want to know. And we want to know now. How wonderful that our Jewish faith celebrates doubt itself. Our Shabbat prayerbook reminds us:

DOUBTING is but the forefront of faith, a faith in the infinite growth of an unbounded creation.

To doubt that the past has uncovered all things is to express faith that many things are still to be uncovered. (*MT Festival Eve*)

Contrast that with being taught that to doubt is weakness, to doubt is an offense, to doubt is the opposite of faith. There was a Broadway Show that was turned into an Oscar –winning movie that explored that version of 'doubt.' The show, simply named with that one word "Doubt" opens with a priest delivering a sermon that begins with the following very good question: "What do you do when you are not sure?"

The play focuses on two nuns and an accusation made against a priest they work with. All data is clearly inconclusive, but what is fascinating is to watch those nuns and observe that the stronger the doubt raised regarding their stand on the issue, the stronger their conviction in their own position. *The stronger the doubt, the stronger the conviction.*

We can't afford to have that be our reaction to being in doubt. We can't allow doubt to cause us to dig in our heels. We need to develop the ability to live with ambiguity. The Jewish version of the show "Doubt" is radically different. It is called "Fiddler on the Roof" and it raises the issue of doubt in its own way. The priest in the show "Doubt" asks that most compelling question: "What do you do when you are not sure?" And Tevye, the milkman, answers in a most compelling and instructive way: "On the one hand, but on the other hand."

We need more Tevyes in national leadership today. Being utterly certain about matters that have no simple answer is utterly disastrous. We need to be more like Tevye in our personal lives as well, not so certain that we are always right and others are always wrong.

We can learn a lot from the 3 commands given at the beginning of a race: “On your mark, get set, go!” Woe to the leader and woe to the country that mixes up the commands and jumps in with: “Go, get set, on your mark.” A leader has to lead and choices have to be made, but listening to Tevye’s two hands has to come first.

Some leaders on the world stage today think that because they have religion, they have the answers. But faith does not equal knowledge. Faith does not equal certitude. Faith is about the quest, faith is about humility, faith is an acknowledgment that the world itself is a vast wonder that surpasses our understanding.

Faith does not equal knowledge. And faith surely does not equal knowing who God is. We have a word for the phenomenon of thinking that you know who God is – we call that idolatry. A litmus test for who has the right faith? We have a word for that too – we call it tyranny. A religion that divides the world into black and white and good and evil? We have a name for that too. We call it Manicheism, a religion that emerged in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, after Christianity and before Islam and a religion that faded away centuries ago because it was too simplistic.

The United States has been not only a haven but also a true home for the Jewish people and for Jewish life. We have flourished in this country because of our common commitments to democracy, to representation, to always giving the minority voice an honored place at the table, to the quest for knowledge, to freedom of religion, to freedom of speech, to separation of church and state. These have been the values that Jews and Americans have held in common and treasured as the key to a healthy and vibrant society. But today I am not so sure.

Once upon a time this country valued education above all. We valued leaders who were thoughtful and articulate. Now the sound-bite has further lured us towards simple answers.

We are celebrating the New Year of 5777. According to Jewish tradition that means that our world was created five thousand, seven hundred and seventy-seven years ago. Thankfully, there is another great Jewish tradition which says we are never supposed to turn our brains off to turn our faith on so we also embrace the scientific research which teaches that our world – contrary to the Jewish calendar – is actually some 13.6 billion years old.

As we celebrate the creation of the world, we bemoan the seductive power of a non-scientific movement that cunningly speaks of creation-ism. Creation-ism firmly rejects the discoveries of science regarding the creation of the world and the development of life on our planet. In the beginning, God created the heaven and the earth. It happened 5,777 years ago, and it happened 13.6 billion years ago. And it continues to happen every day. All true.

Why is science so threatening to religion? Why are science and religion construed to be opposites? Only those tempted by simple answers would find science to be threatening to faith. Every scientific discovery, every scientific phenomenon, every scientific theory only serves to further our sense of wonder at the marvelous world in which we live. A God who could create a human being from a rib – that’s pretty good – but a God who can create DNA and create a human thirst for learning that can discover that DNA – now that is Divine! We stand with that greatest of scientists – Albert Einstein – who said:

“All religions, arts and sciences are branches of the same tree.... My religion, says Einstein, consists of a humble admiration of the Spirit. The search for truth is more precious than its possession.”

*The search for truth is more precious than its possession.* To invert that equation is to commit the sin of certainty. Let us reject the lure of simplicity and thank God for the wonder of the infinite complexity of our lives and our world. A world shrouded in mystery. A world far beyond certainty, a world where we embrace the wisdom of the citation from the Talmud that states: “Teach your tongue to say ‘I don’t know.’” (*Talmud Bavli, Berachot 4a*)

Let us, in the year to come, ponder the challenge that lies within the experience of doubt: “What do you do when you are not sure?”

We are now precisely 10 days into the New Year of 5777. We are not marking an event that happened 5,777 years ago, not even 13 billion years ago. Today. We begin anew today. May this new year be a year of searching for truth, a year of less certainty and more humility, a year of embracing the ambiguity of this wondrous gift we call life.

*Ken yihi ratzon*  
May it be God’s will  
-- *Shana Tova* --