

Sermon ROSH HASHANA 2nd day 5767
Rabbi Claudio Kogan
Anshe Emeth Memorial Temple

“Shema Koleinu”-Hear Our Voice

A bird was confined to its cage. Another bird came and said, “You must be so happy to have all your food given to you without having to look for it!”

The confined bird replied, “How pitiful you are! You see my food, but you cannot see the bars on my cage.”-- *Ecclesiastes Rabbah 11:8*

This story reminds me when, few years ago, I was a student rabbi in Sioux Falls, South Dakota some people called me a rabbi and others student rabbi. I will never forget when someone before Rosh Hashanah stopped into my office and said to me: “Rabbi, it's so hard to believe.” She told me of the *tzuross* that she had going on in her family-a few people had serious illnesses. “Why, Rabbi, why should I believe? You try so hard to be part of this small Jewish community, to come and attend, to transfer some of the values that Judaism teaches to my children, and it is so frustrating!”

What could I say? After all, every student rabbi in small town is the one who is supposed to have all the answers. Well, the problem was that I missed that class at rabbinical school.

How I wish I had some words, some magic bullet that could make it right. Being a medical doctor I can understand the physiopathology of a disease but still I don't know why our loved ones get ill and die. I don't know, I'm still looking for the answer myself.

And you know what: Sometimes it is hard to believe.

Would that we could all be like Abraham, whose story we read yesterday. Would that we could just arise early in the morning, like he did, to believe what God tells us no matter how difficult it is to understand.

Sometimes I wonder if I had been Abraham's shoes, what I would have responded. Thankfully, I haven't been tested like Abraham.

But for us it's doubly hard to believe. It's harder than in the days of Abraham, for we have conquered so much of the space around us. We know the secrets of the gene; we know about antibiotics and magnetic resonance imaging. We are conquering the mysteries of light and mathematics. An abacus is a poor excuse for a calculator, which is nothing compared to a PC, which is nothing compared to today's super computers. It takes only a few hours to travel hundreds of miles from place to place. And we are venturing out to the planets around us.

God, we are in control.

The academy and laboratory hold the answer to our problems. And humans manage them: by doctors, engineers, and scientists. We turn on our cars in the morning and we have faith that they will start, not because of You, God, but because we have faith in the human engineers who designed them. We flip the light switch or turn on the TV and we expect something to happen-even though we may have no idea how electricity or circuitry actually works. We rely, almost every moment, on what other humans provide for us-the means of human existence.

We would be foolish not to. I don't expect any one of you to believe that if your car doesn't turn over in the morning it is God fault. That is not the way our world works. Look around us! Look at the vastness, the enormous changes, that have taken place in our world. We are standing at the beginning of a new millennium according to the secular reckoning of time-and look how much has changed. A thousand years ago, there was nothing close to an accurate map of the world. Today we have hand held global positioning devices that tell you exactly where you are standing. Think of the great writings of the past: of Aristotle and Plato, of Philo and the writings of the rabbis, the Talmud and the Midrash. Works written over a period of thousands of years. All of them, today, can fit onto one CD.

I recently read. . .

Who needs God in such a world? I mean, really, what is the point of praying when it is to humans that we look for the answers to our problems?

And so what right does our prayer book have in saying, in words we read just before the *Avinu Malkeinu*:

Many have said to the works of their hands: you are our gods. Strange, then, to see the emptiness in those who have cast You out! Strange to see the agonies of our time grow more numerous and more intense, the more our worship centers on ourselves. Strange that men and women grow smaller without You, smaller without the faith that You are with them.

Don't chastise us by comparing the works of our hands to the Golden Calf!

Who here would be willing to give up the fantastic medical breakthroughs, engineering accomplishments, information and communication technologies, that we have developed? Not I.

But there is something missing here. There is something missing in our lives because we are still unhappy. Perhaps we are even more unhappy than Abraham ever was. For we expect, we demand from ourselves technologies that will heal us, that will help us communicate better, calculate faster, and travel with less discomfort. And when they don't, we don't know where to turn.

So what could it mean? What could our prayer book mean?

I am not, for one second, suggesting that we turn the clocks back to the days of Abraham. And neither does Judaism. Judaism teaches us that the intellect, the ability of humans to think, and create, and adapt our world is the divine spirit planted within us.

Why denigrate, why abandon, what makes us truly human?

It's just that, as a result of the vast amount of information necessary to live in this world, we have paid scant heed to the matters of the spirit. That, in my opinion, is what drives us to the point of despair.

The question for us is not, "How can we return to that time of simple faith of yesteryear?" The question for us is: "What place does God have in our lives?"

The truth is, as post-modern people we think we have outgrown God. We have pushed God to the peripheries of our lives-to the margins of our existence.

We live in a time when the knowledge at our fingertips dwarfs many times the knowledge available to Plato and Aristotle, not to mention the knowledge available to the Rabbis or great Jewish philosophers like Maimonides.

The fact is that there is very little reason in modern life to put our faith in God. We have lots of faith in our abilities, but what kind of faith is compatible with that reality?

We live in a time where we do not believe in things we can't see. If it can't be "demonstrated" in a lab, it may be a "nice" idea, but it doesn't hold too much weight in our world.

How we long for a God that will "show us" what we want to see!

How we long for religious leaders, like Moses and Aaron, who can turn staffs into snakes and perform miracles in God's name!

The attitude of our time is reflected in the humorous story about the secular Jew who goes to Israel and visits the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, the last relic of the Second Temple. He sees people praying, *davening*, and he is immediately drawn to an older man who is fervently praying. After a short time, he goes up to the man and says: "I see you praying with so much effort and energy, please tell me, do you ever get an answer?" The other man looks at him and says, "It's like talking to a wall"

So where has the tremendous progress in human knowledge led us? On what basis can we claim to have "faith" in a "show me the money" world? Why pray?

Why continue the Jewish faith? Why continue to send our children to Hebrew School?

We are not the first generation that has dealt with these questions. In fact, as those who will join me in the class that I will teach on “Jewish thinkers” every Wednesday at noon, will study the greatest Jewish philosopher of all times, Moses Maimonides, asked a very similar question in the 12th century. Even then, there were people who had studied science and had begun to lose faith in religion. The perplexed of his day questioned whether the world was created or eternal. As we read today in the Torah, Genesis chapter 1 says that the world was created, but science suggests that the world is eternal. How can the post-modern person-someone who studied the teachings of the philosophers-still believe in Torah?

So Maimonides wrote the *Moreh Nevukhim*-Guide of the Perplexed. In it, he marshals every argument he can to demonstrate that the world was created, in the end he finds that he cannot prove it. Then he marshals every argument he can find that the world is eternal. In the end, he finds, he cannot prove that either. So, what advice does Maimonides give? What should the perplexed person do?

Maimonides suggests that he take a leap of faith and accept that the world is created because it says so in the Torah.

Wait a minute! That's completely unacceptable! You just said that the creation story of The Bible-the story we read this morning--cannot be proven. He further told us that science, as good as it is, as far as it can demonstrate, cannot prove that the world is eternal.

Why, then, should I take a leap of faith and believe anything that can't be demonstrated empirically?

Maimonides' words have been debated by Jewish scholars for centuries. In my opinion, there is something profound, yet simple, in Maimonides leap of faith.

What Maimonides is teaching is the limits of science.

He is not arguing for "blind" faith. He is not "rejecting" science and reason. Not at all! Science, empirical truth-that which can be observed and repeated, is crucial for the fulfillment of human endeavors. That which is "true" must be demonstrated and explained against the unchanging laws of nature. But there comes a point where science can no longer explain, and that is the place where faith enters our lives. Science, Maimonides teaches, explains how the world operates. Knowing the how is very helpful when you want to manipulate the world in ways useful to human endeavor.

Without knowing the how we would not have math, science, physics, or biology. These are the bases of medicine, engineering, aeronautics, communication and every other area that depend on empirically demonstrable and repeatable events. What science cannot teach us is why the world operates.

Why am I here? What is the meaning of my life today in 5767? What is the purpose of existence in today's world? I believe that this is the time to think about these questions. Judaism gives us the privilege to ask these questions on Rosh Hashana!!! When we come to these questions, Maimonides teaches, we have reached the limits of science.

Science teaches us what is. Judaism teaches why it is.

Leaving Maimonides and returning to the perplexities of our time, we live in a time where there is more information at our disposal than ever before. We live in a time when the mysteries of genetics are being unraveled. We are cloning sheep and making mice smarter. Using incredible technologies, we can view inside the human body without an incision. We can be in contact with others halfway around the globe with pocket telephones.

Yet for all our knowledge, and all our abilities, we have made little progress in understanding why we are here. What is the purpose of our lives? Why did God put us here? Why?

What have all the advances in human knowledge taught us about God? As a rabbi and a medical doctor I experience almost every day that science and religion are not incompatible. Many of us have experienced how powerful and spiritual the *Misheverach* is when someone is ill. Science and Jewish tradition are both necessary for a healthy well-rounded humanity. We are learning that we need God in our lives. We are learning that, no matter how much we know, no matter how many realms we conquer, we shall never conquer the realm of why without a faith that teaches us that we do all this for a reason.

There was a time when human progress seemed so great that it- in and of itself-was thought to be the messiah. Soon there would come a time when all humans would live in peace and harmony. People, using their rational faculties, would reject hatred and only do what was right, what was ethical.

But we have learned that human beings left on their own, have just as much capacity to do evil as they have to do good. If you do not think so, look into today's world. The Shoah shook our faith in the ability of human progress to overcome evil.

Reason and science and technology are good. They are important. They improve our lives every day.

But, they alone, are no guarantee of righteous or ethical behavior. And there is no need to resort to mention of the Shoah in our world to prove that. You and I know that it is a good thing to rest and refresh our souls. We know that it is good to spend quality time with our families. We know that it is good to honor our parents.

But when was the last time that we really observed Shabbat? We know that the act of eating is something that should be done with care. We know that, if we eat meat, that an animal had to give its life to provide us with sustenance. We know that a farmer had to use all the tools available to make sure the food we consume reaches us in edible form. But, when was the last time that we began our meal with a blessing?

Judaism gives our lives meaning. It teaches us that we are in covenant with God. The terms of that covenant are contained in the Torah: the traditions, values, teachings, laws and legends of the Jewish people. That is why it important to support our children's Jewish education!!!

In his book, *Taking Hold of Torah*, the Jewish sociologist Arnold Eisen and appointed Chancellor of the JTS, tells us that-given what we know of people-reason is no guarantee that humans will do what is good even when they know what it is. This doesn't mean that human reason is useless or that human goodness is impossible. Human beings are both capable and fallible. He also writes "My aim is to contribute to the revitalization of the contemporary American Jewish community-and all that I have learned of the Jewish past tells me that no Jewish community has ever existed except on the basis of a live, engaged relation to the Torah," -The best hope for a Jewish future, he writes, is having more and more people experience the transformative power of Jewish learning. "If personal experience of the text resonates with 'inner power,' as it has in recent years for many Jews exposed to encounter with Torah for the first time," he says, "they will come back for more."

Nothing reminds us of that better than these High Holy Days. These Days of Awe are based on the idea that we know we haven't lived up to what we could be, that we are capable of so much more. After thorough self-examination and a pledge to change-to become more of what we were meant to be-we receive forgiveness and a chance to go on.

Why should we believe? Why pray to God at the Western Wall when we are not sure if God hears or if God will answer? Why? Because-even with all the struggle that we have with our faith-Judaism has the power to give our lives meaning. Jacob wrestled with an angel of God by a river. In the end, the angel changed his name to Yisrael-one who struggles with God.

In the opening day of our Hebrew School I said to my students, all of us are Yisrael, We are Yisrael. We are strugglers, wrestlers, with God. We reject, only to return. That is the basis of our covenant, our Torah. That covenant has the power to give our lives meaning. And in our fast changing world, we need to understand why we are here. Torah centers us and its teachings reminds us that we are part of an eternal people dedicated to improving ourselves and our world. We are inheritors of a faith that is based on hope. Hope that, despite the evil surrounding us, despite the difficulties we face on a daily basis, the world is getting better. If not for us, then for our children. May we enter this New Year filled with hope.

The prayer book, or *Machsor*, chastises us:

Many have said to the works of their hands: you are our gods. Strange, then, to see the emptiness in those who have cast You out! Strange to see the agonies of our time grow more numerous and more intense, the more our worship centers on ourselves. Strange that men and women grow smaller without You, smaller without the faith that You are with them.

It concludes:

We pray, therefore, that this day which yet restores Your people, may help us come close to You, the living God, the God of life. For You are with us whenever we seek Your presence. You are absent only when we shut You out, only when, full of ourselves, we leave no room for You within our hearts.

Teach us, a God, to make room in our world for You. Give us the capacity to see the food that you gives us every day and the courage to destroy all the “bars” that appear in our life.

Renew our Hope to live a better life.

Shana Tova!!!

May all of us will be inscribed for blessing in the book of life.