Faith In The Midst Of Uncertainty
A sermon delivered by
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Shanah Tovah to everyone. How wonderful it is to return to the sanctuary, to share together with friends and family, to celebrate this new year, this time of Teshuvah, when we are given the opportunity to reflect and consider the meaning of our lives, think about this past year and, to ask ourselves who and what we want to be in the year to come. Used properly, these days of return are an extraordinary time to consider the meaning of being alive. How blessed we all are to join here and engage in these days of self and communal reflection.

For me, your Rabbi, these days always come early. While the summer is a time for relaxation, for casual wear, for children to spend time in the fresh air, for me it is always an anxious time; not simply because I have sermons to prepare, but more significantly because I have always found the summer to be the time when I ask myself, what I have done, what have I accomplished, where I am leading you? After 36 years of being your Rabbi, this summer’s reflection was filled with more introspection than ever before. As many of you have told me, “thirty-six years is a long time in one congregation.”

There is a story of two men in an art gallery. They are strangers to each other but both are looking at a piece of art hanging on the wall. One says to the other, “Little pictures leave me cold. It is the grand, big canvas that I like.” The other man says to him, “I take it that you are an art critic?” “No,” replied the first. I’m a maker of frames.

I

As I thought about these wonderful years together I reflected, not on what we have built, not the physical and material, but the essence of our community and the essential meaning of our lives.

As one of my rabbinic teachers taught me, being a rabbi “is to be a maker of frames.” Our task is to create frames for the inner life – the little pictures and the big. We make frames for joy; we make frames for sorrow. We make frames for pictures for the mind, the heart, and the inner soul. At Brit Milah and Consecration, at Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah, too – we create frames for youthful faith and for aging hope. We transform anxious moments at weddings and funerals by framing the canvass upon which the portrait of life is painted in order to give us perspective to be able to comprehend the sacred and the holy in marriage, in life, in living.

Permit me this morning to reflect on our lives, to share with you the thoughts from my heart about the inner life, the portraits of living that you and I paint on the canvas of our days on Earth.
A few nights ago, as we gathered for our annual observance of Selichot, we began by viewing the recent Coen Brothers movie *A Serious Man*. It was nominated for an Academy Award for best picture. It didn’t win. And I believe it was a box office failure. But *A Serious Man* is a very important movie about life and living. It asks one simple but profound question.

The movie itself is the story of Larry Gopnick and his family. The Gopnicks live in suburban America in the mid 1960’s. Larry is a math professor; up for tenure. His son, Danny, is about to become bar mitzvah. As the movie unfolds, Larry encounters one life-testing moment after another. And each time he asks the same question: “What’s going on?”

How many times have you asked yourself, “What’s going on?” Like Gopnick, so many of us have encountered job loss, shrinking of assets, children who challenge us and choose to live out their dreams and not necessarily ours, spouses or friends who disappoint us or who test our trust. How often have we discovered that the control we want over our own lives is elusive, that we find ourselves asking the very question that Gopnick asks, “What’s going on?” We are frightened of possible illness; terror continues to reign in the streets and in the skies, and we ask, “What’s going on?”

As we get closer to the end of the movie we find Gopnick teaching a class. As the Coen brothers reveal to us:

We are close over Larry’s shoulder as he scribbles symbols onto the chalkboard. Larry says: “… and that means… so that.. from which we derive…” His glance back toward the class shows him to be wearier, baggier-eyed, more haggard than ever. And there is something odd about his posture.

He makes his writing smaller and smaller so as to finish before hitting the right edge of the chalkboard. “and also… which lets us … and…” Wider as he finishes and straightens up, revealing that he has been stooping to write across the very bottom of the board. The equation covers every inch of the classroom-wide three-paneled chalkboard. Larry is an off-balance figure at the right of the frame. The class is staring at him and he says “OK?” He claps chalk dust from his hands and declares: “The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can’t ever really know … what’s going on. (There is a pause, and then Larry continues) … But even if you can’t figure anything out, you’ll still be responsible for it on the mid-term.”

Larry is right. We can’t ever really know what is going on. We have to learn to live with uncertainty in our lives. And our tradition teaches that we are “still responsible for it on the mid-term;” you and I cannot use the uncertainty principle as an excuse for irresponsible living.

Strange words for a rabbi to share with his congregation on Rosh Hashanah? I suppose you are right! But the truth is that we do live with uncertainty. Just the other day we were preparing for the worst from Hurricane Earl. It could have been one of the most ferocious and destructive forces in our time. And we remember the devastation from Katrina and in Haiti or...
more recently in Pakistan. At any moment, we could be the ones in the path of such natural forces. We live near the ocean; our State rests on a fault line. Life is truly uncertain.

We ride the NJ Turnpike at high speeds, taking enormous risks as we travel up and down our State’s busiest highway. The economic recession that we have experienced has shown us how financial security and job security are elusive. No one can assure us that government now or in the future will guarantee us a life that is safe and secure. Remember, our precious America once underwent a civil war; who says it could never happen again. When extremism is on the rise, as it is today, moderation and safety cannot be assured. What, then, should be our response?

III

Albert Einstein once said that “there are two ways to see the world: as if everything is a miracle or as if nothing is a miracle.” I believe that is why we are here today, to find the way to see the miracle in life, to discover the language that we need from our faith, our tradition, that will enable us to make sense out of something that often seems senseless, to see the miracle in living.

You and I are the products of two different world views. One is what I call the psycho-social, the world view of western civilization. It is represented by the education that all of us received. It is Greco-Roman in its orientation: study of mathematics and science and literature and philosophy. It is the schooling of reason, of facts, of learning to understand the order of the universe. The other, is the world view of theology, or more specifically, the world view of Judaism. It is rabbinic in its orientation: study of Torah, Mishnah, the prayer book. It is the schooling of faith, the search for understanding the meaning of being created in the Divine Image, knowing the unknown, and discovering the miraculous or the world of wonder.

One view sees the world and knowledge as a puzzle. The goal is to find the solution; it is a matter of intellect; the solution is all that matters; putting the pieces of the puzzle together. The other view sees the world as mystery. You and I journey through life because it is filled with mystery. There is no starting line where the gun goes off and you run the course until you cross the finish line. This world view, the theological view, is represented by questioning and discovery, by seeing life as art, by recognizing that living exists not in solutions but in relationships, in possibilities, in mystery. Such a view of the world is less concerned with what God might be than with what faith in God might make me.

Truth be told, you and I are products of both world views. In our early years we are taught that the theological and the psycho-social worlds are to be kept separate and apart. But most of us discover along the way that we need both. Science and faith are not exclusive to each another; for humans we need a synthesizing of the two.

Here is an example of what I mean. Hardly any family in our congregation has escaped the reality of dealing with Cancer or some other disease, or some tragedy. Yet, as I have walked through the dark forest of illness or tragedy with so many of you I have come to see over and over again that two components have been necessary in responding and restoring ourselves to life. They are: choice and faith. For sure, in the case of illness, one is the choice of medicine – the proper and early diagnosis, the treatment, the skill of the physicians. But the other is the choice of faith – faith in knowing that I am not alone, that my family, my friends, my community
will not abandon me and that just as I need them they need me. My faith is based on love, on relationships, on the belief that life, whether lived long or short, has purpose. And over the years I have discovered that people who have encountered crises in their lives, whether of illness or tragedy, have spent less time gazing into the grave than they have in staring up at the stars.

I am not speaking about blind, dogmatic, ritual or religious practice; I am talking about people who possess a living faith, a faith in the belief that their lives count. Rabbi David Wolpe describes what I mean in his book *Why Faith Matters*. He tells us:

> I have known religious people all my life. Among them are unkind, small-minded, tyrannical, or even cowardly people. A few have used faith to appear selfless while prosecuting monstrously selfish agendas. Most, however, engage in innumerable activities of kindness, charity, and selflessness. They set up soup kitchens, create networks of volunteers to visit the sick, contribute money and skills to help the poor, and pray for others in need. Few of them do it because they fear death. Far stronger is the impulse to responsibility, to living a sacred life, a life of service.iii

IV

Not so long ago, our cousin Susie died. Her mother wrote to me the following words which I share with you today:

> Her [Susie’s] death was incomprehensible and catastrophic. . . . Susie, was a vital, exuberant 48 year old, single mother of three children who lived in St. Louis. A former dancer, personal trainer, aerobics and Pilates instructor. . . . On December 16th, last year, she interrupted a burglary in her home by two 17-year-olds - with nothing better to do with their lives than ransack people's houses. One of them had stolen a gun during a prior burglary. Susie, tragically, walked into her home and found the two teenagers there, and she was immediately shot three times and killed with the stolen gun. This nightmare should never be experienced by anyone, let alone a parent and extinguish the life so brutally, and violently of someone who was so young, giving and vibrant.iii

None of us here can fully understand the depth of pain that Susie’s mother feels. The death of a child is the most painful that any of us can experience. But the violent death of a child can take us to depths we can’t even begin to imagine. And what is her mother’s response? She continues with these words:

> My family believes that our moral choice or action is to counteract our sadness by emphasizing our positives; our family, friends, business associates and for me specifically, by focusing our efforts on promoting gun control legislation. . . . As human beings, choice is what we are faced with in our everyday lives. From those small choices such as how to dress, eat, conduct ourselves to larger ones
regarding a "woman's right to choose." . . . Put another way, Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav the famous thinker and philosopher has stated, "Everything in the world - whatever is and whatever happens - is a test, designed to give you freedom of choice. Choose wisely."

It is true. Our world is filled with uncertainty. But there is one certainty we all live with: the ability to make the choice in the way in which we will live. We can choose to curse the day we were born, to see disappointment in the events of our lives. Oh often I have been saddened as I have watched people focus on the small, minute, and unimportant matters of life. Or, we can choose to make the most out of every day, focusing on our humility, our ability to bring about goodness, to touch others with kindness. We can ask why life is so puzzling, or we can, with faith, see the mystery and wonder of life. On Rosh Hashanah we are reminded that “the world will not perish for want of wonders, but for want of wonder!”

IV

My dear congregation, a few moments ago, in the midst of our worship, we prayed the following words:

Our god and God of all ages, be mindful of Your people Israel on this Day of Remembrance, and renew in us love and compassion, goodness, life and peace. This day remember us for well-being. This day bless us with Your nearness. This day help us to live.

On this precious day, and throughout the sacred days to come, I invite you to consider the following addition to the prayer. This day, as we recognize the uncertainty of life, help us to see the mystery and wonder of living. This day, as we deal with the crises and tragedies of humanity, help us to possess the strength to make choices for service and sacred living. And, this day, as we reflect on what has brought us to this place, help us to use our moments of reflection to heal shattered hearts, to repair broken relationships, and to once again seek to live a life that is whole and filled with blessing every precious day that is ours to behold.

I ask you to fulfill the words of this prayer by making them a new reality in our lives. Together, let us paint a portrait of living entitled “faith in the midst of uncertainty.” Then, let us put that reality into a magnificent frame, place it on the wall of our existence so that others may behold it and call us blessed.

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i A Serious Man, by Ethan Coen and Joel Coen
iii Lois Schaefer, words delivered on Yom Kippur 5770 at Temple Beth El, Great Neck, New York