

Is Faith Still Relevant?
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Rosh Hashanah 2nd Day 5778

A terrible storm came into a town and local officials sent out an emergency warning that the riverbanks would soon overflow and flood the nearby homes. They ordered everyone in the town to evacuate immediately.

A devout individual heard the warning and decided to stay, saying to himself, "I will trust God and if I am in danger, then God will send a divine miracle to save me."

The neighbors came by his house and said to him, "We're leaving and there is room for you in our car, please come with us!" But the man declined. "I have faith that God will save me."

As the man stood on his porch watching the water rise up the steps, someone in a canoe paddled by and called to him, "Hurry and come into my canoe, the waters are rising quickly!" But the man again said, "No thanks, God will save me."

The floodwaters rose higher pouring water into his living room and the man had to retreat to the second floor. A police motorboat came by and saw him at the window. "We will come up and rescue you!" they shouted. But the man refused, waving them off saying, "Use your time to save someone else! I have faith that God will save me!"

The flood waters rose higher and higher and the man had to climb up to his rooftop.

A helicopter spotted him and dropped a rope ladder. A rescue officer came down the ladder and pleaded with the man, "Grab my hand and I will pull you up!" But the man STILL refused, folding his arms tightly to his body. "No thank you! God will save me!"

Shortly after, the house broke up and the floodwaters swept the man away and he drowned.

When in Heaven, the man stood before God and asked, "I put all of my faith in You. Why didn't You come and save me?"

And God said, “Son, I sent you a warning. I sent you a car. I sent you a canoe. I sent you a motorboat. I sent you a helicopter. What more were you looking for?”

I have always been fond of this witty story and usually take great joy in telling it, but over the past few weeks, it has become more somber for me. In places like Huston and Florida, we have seen more than a car or a motorboat, and even a plethora of Coast Guard helicopters act as the emissaries, the *Malechai Hasherat*, Ministering Angels of God, zipping around doing their best to save everyone. Some went with them, and others did not and some, no matter how far they ran or how well they hid or barricaded themselves in, they were not able to escape the fury of Mother Nature. That was in Texas and Florida, but what about the Caribbean for which there was no escape? To me, the point of this vignette is not to cast blame on the man who stayed and perished but to follow up on his question of, “God, where are you during the storms of our lives?”

In the aftermath of these storms, in print and media, the number of times I have seen God’s name mentioned has exponentially increased. This happens anytime there is a disaster – God’s numbers always go up. But just because people are invoking the name of God, it doesn’t mean that it’s all positive numbers.

There have been plenty of individuals that have an opinion on where God was during these hurricanes. On Facebook and other media, I have witnessed a plethora of people claiming that it was Divine Punishment for our acceptance of same-sex marriage... oh, wait, no that wasn't it... it was that our country now condones Neo-Nazis... oh wait, not that’s not what I saw.. the last rant I saw was that God was punishing the people of Houston for their wanton abuse of the land. Essentially they believe that God is punishing us for whatever they think is wrong with society and it’s all those other people’s fault. That’s one side of the “where is God?” debate. Perhaps one could consider the middle ground of the “Where is God?” spectrum the belief that God is not found in the blowing of the winds, but in the hands and arms of the rescuers and all those sending aide...these *Malechai Hasharet*. Then at the other extreme is the belief that there is no God, that climate change is what made these storms particularly bad. By the way, God’s existence

doesn't negate climate change, there can be climate change and there can also be God, the two aren't mutually exclusive. However, on the whole, what a broad sense we have of God and where God's place is in the world. How different we all feel about how God works God's wonders and where our certainties about those wonders lie.

I was watching the news last week after Hurricane Irma came through Florida. I saw a segment that showed two homes. One house, utterly destroyed, the other, completely fine. The owner of the house that was untouched proclaimed that God saved her family. The other owner wondered what she could have done to have deserved God's wrath.

Sure, one answer could be that the first individual was an upstanding citizen, always giving to worthy causes and was the epitome of moral and ethical behavior and the other did something to merit God's wrath. Perhaps she violated one of the laws of which there is a high penalty like the laws of *Shatnez*, and she was dressed for the storm wearing a garment made of both linen and wool. Although looking out into the congregation today, my guess is many of us are violating *Shatnez* right now and yet, the dome of our congregation appears to still be firmly attached to its supports.

Perhaps the answer is less metaphysical. Perhaps it's because the first house, as the woman recalled, had been rebuilt following Hurricane Andrew. Thus, it had reinforced concrete walls and foundations and had hurricane-proof glass and shutters, while the other house had weathered Andrew with no significant damage and therefore did not have these necessary improvements. Perhaps if God could answer this woman's pleas for meaning God might say, "It wasn't me," or "You're looking for me in the wrong direction."

When men with over-inflated egos are trying to prove their self-worth by threatening nuclear fire, "God, where are you?" All these storms can not only breed fear, but they and their aftereffects can also breed apathy and the loss of faith. "How do I stand and weather these storms? How does my faith weather these storms? There is such devastation in the world, if there is a loving God, how could these

events have been allowed to occur? Perhaps God is not even in these responses to the storm; perhaps it's just plain old human kindness?"

I teach a class for our 10th and 11th Grade students called "Wrestling with God." Our classroom is a safe place where we can ask tough questions, and wrestle with our beliefs. Two Sundays ago we wrestled with the question, can a Jew still be considered a Jew if they are an atheist or an agnostic. They wrestled greatly with the notion of a faithless Jew. Some articulated that faith was a necessity, while others questioned whether faith was still relevant in modernity – that there are other things that unite us as a people. We did come to one firm conclusion which was that faith is a tough topic to talk about. It's easy for them to say they are Jews, but to say that they are people of faith or to discuss their faith is hard for them, as I am sure that it is difficult for many of us.

There is a story that I'm about to share with them to help them think about their faith, and I would like to share it with you now. It's from a collection of short stories known as Friedman's Fables written by renowned scholar Rabbi Ed Friedman of blessed memory. This one is entitled, *American Holly*:

There was a certain holly tree whose owner, when it was very young, planted it close to the foundation of his house to shelter the tree from the icy blasts of winter. He had done right. For it is the way of young, board-leaved evergreens to lose their vital moisture to the evaporation of the winter winds.

As time went by, however, the holly grew and soon found itself competing with that which had protected it during early life. The owner, therefore, decided to let the plant have more room. Carefully, early one spring, he dug up the sprouting tree and replanted it some distance away so it could branch out in all directions. As with the initial planting, the owner did everything with care; the roots were embalmed in a big ball of earth, a moat of mud surrounded the new site to keep the rain from running away, a deep protective blanket of the finest mulch covered the area about the slowly thickening trunk, and fertilizer, again only the finest grade, was liberally applied.

But all did not go well, despite the best intentions and the kindest care. The holly began to lose its leaves. Some were lost every year, of course, but others had always quickly blossomed to take their place. This time the dying leaves were not replenished. Something different was at work.

Perplexed by this unexpected turn of events, the owner gave his tree more care. He borrowed some books from the library to see what he could learn. He wrote to garden experts in the newspapers. Perhaps some blight or other noxious influence had come into the area, though he had read no warnings. He frequented the best garden shops and asked the old-timers what they did on such occasions.

Every question brought an answer; every question acquired more than one answer, if asked more than one time. And with each new suggestion, tale or remedy he heard, the owner hurried back and tried anew. But nothing worked.

Each morning when the owner awoke he found that more leaves had fallen to the ground. Each week another branch was dead. Should these be allowed to remain on the trunk? Can life flow again through such hardened wood? Or does the dead decay and add decay to the living nearby?

When fall came, the holly was a sorry sight. Few leaves were left, and most of them were turning brown. The frost came, and then it was too late in the year to try more remedies. But the owner hadn't ceased to care.

Every morning as he went to work, he saw the tree and wondered where he might have erred. Sometimes in the middle of the night, if he could not sleep and happened by the window, he would stop and stare. If there was moonlight, the branches, now so sparse of leaves, seemed even more bare.

Several times that winter it snowed, and the fall covered the lower, thicker part of the trunk so that the remainder looked like some cast-off limb that had fallen from a taller tree and javelined its way into the ground.

With the spring thaw, the holly's owner hoped again and waited for the buds. Perhaps with so few other leaves to share nutrients, there would be more than ever. But no. If anything, there were fewer.

Still the owner tried: more fertilizer, a newer, softer blanket of mulch, further, careful pruning of the tips of the limbs, water with every day sun. But the holly did not respond.

One day during the early summer before the owner was about to leave for a vacation, he was preparing his other plants for some weeks without attention, and he came upon his sorrowful tree. Gingerly he pruned each little limb that had died. He would bend each back gently to see if the sign of life – the rubbery flexibility – was there, and if so, he let it snap softly back into place; if not, with his clippers, as always, at the proper angle, he sheared it near the base, as always at the proper place. This time, however, something changed in his heart. Rather than pity, he began to feel anger.

Suddenly, he began to cut without checking carefully to be sure the limb was dead. Faster he began to clip, faster and with gusto, indiscriminately, this way and that, this limb and that, and then, in rage, the trunk itself. And when he finally stopped, exhausted, his heart thumping, all that faced him was a scraggly stick that came up to his nose. He hung his shears away and left with his family. Only once while they were gone did he think about the tree, and he said to his wife, "I'll dig it up when we return."

But when they returned something had changed. As they drove up, at first from the distance, and then with closer view, all could see the holly now bristling green. From every cut and wound and point from which a parted limb had gone, a hundred prickly scorning tongues.

While this story may have multiple applications to our lives, when I first read this story, I immediately thought of faith. How wonderfully our faith grows when we are young, when it is kept sheltered and nourished. Like the kids in our religious school, they grow tall and strong with their faith, not too unlike the holly tree. But our students can't live here protected forever and their curiosity grows – like it ought to – and they shoot out new roots and branches yearning for answers. That which gave them security can now be holding them back and get in their way. So we transplant them and give them new soil and space to grow. We give them tough questions and dilemmas to wrestle with to help them deal with their new environment and help them gain a greater sense of their budding Jewish identity. We provide for them a more mature way to see the world. But we live in troubling times and the elements are tough on them and their faith; just like the tree that could not thrive.

Just for a moment, I'd like us to think of our lives, or even our identity as Jews, as being a garden. Picture all the various trees or plants that reside within that garden. Each of these plants represents different aspects of our identity and in particular, the things we do to maintain a Jewish identity. Perhaps there is a "Tree of *Talmud Torah*" the study of Torah (you could even call it the "Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil" whose fruit is delicious). Perhaps there is the "Tree of *Tikkun Olam*" whose fruit beckons you to acts of social justice. Or perhaps there is the "Tree of *Bichor Cholim*," of visiting and caring for those who are sick and in need of care and concern. Perhaps there is a "Tree of *Ohavei Trabut*," A tree that is radiant with Jewish life and culture whose gifts range from music and theater to corned beef and pastrami (or for some, maybe tongue) on rye. As Jews, we should be tending all these trees and we, as your clergy, try to give you as many opportunities as we can to water these trees and to nurture them here at the Temple. But it's not always easy to tend

them all, and I suspect that for many of us our “Trees of Faith” may be the harder ones to care for, to engage with and to nurture. My guess is that for many of us, when presented with the challenges that our teens wrestled with we either stopped engaging or left the tree untended to see what it would do. In some cases, these trees blossomed, in some cases these trees aged rather poorly.

How many of us, like the gardener in our story, have gotten frustrated at our own “Trees of Faith” and have hacked away at them? We hack away when we don’t take the time to look for grace in the world, when we don’t delve further into that which bothers us, or when we let our wonderings turn into aimless wanderings. It’s easy to get frustrated when we try to nurture our faith in the same way that we used to, and then it doesn’t come back like it used to. Many of us had discarded the tree before it had time to regrow, to find new life. How many of us, like the holly tree, have discovered that we have built up a resistance to the healing process; that we rationalize God away before we even search for divinity?

I often wonder what makes someone, or something, go contrary to its nature and build up resistance to something that will make it grow stronger. There are plenty of times in my own life, which I’m sure you can all empathize with, that I know doing something a certain way will make everything better and yet, I can’t bring myself to do it. I spend more time and energy avoiding the issue than I would have expended doing it straight away. If only I would listen to that inner voice, it would all be so much better.

The same is true with God. At least in Reform communities, it is tough to talk about God. It’s one thing to read the prayers, to study Scripture or Talmud, it’s another to talk about faith and certainty and doubt. Even at my seminary, God was rarely discussed in a “what do you believe in?” sort of way.

When it comes to nourishing and repairing our faith, perhaps we are sometimes the resistance. What is it that causes us such resistance? Is it our fear of failure? Is it our fear of doubt? I often think of Moses and his faith. His faith might have been different than ours; he did speak to God directly through a burning bush. He did witness the plagues in Egypt and the splitting of the Reed Sea. Those are

some pretty good events to build a rock-solid faith upon. And yet, and yet, he had great moments of doubt.

In a few weeks during Sukkot, we will read a story from the Book of Exodus when God and Moses are up on Mount Sinai. Right before receiving the Ten Commandments for the second time Moses has a moment of doubt and asks God for the ability to look upon the Divine and see God with his very own eyes. God responds to Moses by putting him in the cleft of a mountain and as God passes by God blocks Moses's view so that Moses may only look upon the back of God – he can only see where God has been.

It seems, from this narrative, that God knows that absolute certainty is a bad thing. That there are some aspects of our relationship with God that must remain elusive to us. The truth is that absolute certainty can make one's faith so rigid that it will snap and break like the dead limbs of the holly tree. God seems aware that doubt can be something that keeps faith flexible and full of life.

Doubt is not something to be feared it should be embraced and encountered with to help faith grow. Doubt can be like the hacking of the tree in the story. The tearing down of erroneous beliefs and notions that will let new life return. Don't worry about taking away past assumptions if it means your faith will be able to grow back stronger and fuller.

Doubt can sometimes be the nutrients we need to let faith grow. If we keep feeding our faith the same nutrients and it doesn't thrive, doubt lets us know that it's time for new nutrients: new questions and new thoughts when it comes to where God is in the world and what God expects of us; new questions and thoughts and deeper study of theology and faith and reason. Apathy can make us believe that because the old model that worked now doesn't, our faith is obsolete and there is nothing else. However, doubt, when used carefully, can beckon us to search for more.

Faith is part of who we are as Jews and yes, sometimes it's easier to not think about faith or God and instead think of actions, like *tikkun olam*, or Torah Study or Jewish culture to satiate our desires to have a Jewish identity, but our identity as Jews can suffer greatly if we don't also think of our faith. Our faith is what calls us to

these actions. Calls us to be God's emissaries on earth to stand up to the forces of evil or to tend to those who need us the most. Faith is incredibly relevant to our lives as Jews, and we shouldn't be so quick to cast it off, even if it's the most difficult tree to tend.

Even my thoughts on God are still evolving, changing, growing. I do believe that God is out there, yet I cannot begin to articulate the true nature of what that presence is. I believe that our Scripture and writings help articulate what God wants from us and lead us to acts of care and concern for one another. I believe that this Divine Presence which we refer to as God cares deeply for how we treat each other so that when makeshift rescue boats and go door to door down the streets of Houston, or when we as a Temple come together to send and provide aid, we become the *Malechai Hasharet* the Ministering Angels enacting God's will as best as we can figure out what that will is. Do I believe in a God that sits on high on a Jeweled throne keeping a tally of how we are all behaving to determine whether in the coming year we will receive either blessings or cosmic coal? That I have doubts about.

The real question is, how do we let our faith as Jews adapt to modernity and the ever-changing American landscape? As I look out at our country I see lands of devastation, ravished by so many storms, but I also see more storms on the horizon. We as Jews should utilize our faith to help us weather these storms - it has been our millennia-old source of our courage and our strength. As we ride out the unknown our faith will guide us in how we respond to its aftermath. To be able to respond with love, kindness, hope, and gratitude for all that is holy in our lives. Join me, wrestle with me, let us tend our gardens together as we seek ways to live lives that are the embodiment of a sense of the sacred and the Divine. It may not be easy, but may we all be strengthened by this sacred and often arduous journey. Amen v' Amen.