

An old sea captain was quizzing a young naval student. "What steps would you take if a sudden storm came up starboard?"

"I'd throw out an anchor, sir."

"What would you do if another storm came up aft?"

"I'd throw out another anchor, sir."

"But what if a *third* storm sprang up forward?"

"I'd throw out another anchor, captain?"

"Just a minute, son," said the captain, "Where in the world are you getting all these anchors?"

"From the same place you're getting all your storms."

We have lived, this past year, through more storms than we care to recall. The devastation resulting from Hurricane Katrina, as horrific as it was, pales in comparison to the destruction that resulted from last year's tsunami in the Indian Ocean and this week's tremors in Kashmir. The sorrow and suffering make us pause as we reflect on how often we are buffeted by storms and quakes beyond our control.

Indeed, the randomness of life is a central theme of the prayer *u'nitaneh tokef*, said only at this season. "This is a day awesome (נורא) and full of dread." Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not, in fact, traditionally called the High Holy Days, but *Yamim ha-Nora'im* ("The Days of Awe"). Awe, however, is not only awesome and inspiring, it is also awful. The reason for this duality of meaning becomes evident as the prayer continues. ומי יָמוּת ומי יִחְיֶה, וְכִי יִחְיֶה, וְכִי יָמוּת – "Who shall live and who shall die?"

So often those who read this prayer see it as teaching that all is pre-determined, that our lives are simply the working out of an unavoidable destiny. The point of the *u'nitaneh tokef* is actually, however, the very opposite. There is much that we cannot control - and there are many tempests that buffet us. But תשובה תפילה צדקה - מעבירין את רעה הגזירה - repentance, prayer and righteousness. The translation in our *mahzor* does not do justice to the power of what is stated. It is not just that these things "temper" the decree - making our fate easier to take. The Hebrew can be understood to mean that our "repentance, prayer and righteousness rescind (or annul)" what heaven has in store for us. Far from being fatalistic, then, Yom Kippur teaches that we can weather the storms life brings. The key is having enough anchors.

In the story I have referred to throughout the Days of Awe - *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* - far from a storm being a bad thing, it is the pivotal event that leads the central

character to grow into her truest self. Dorothy's first response to being in the cyclone that lifts her from all that is familiar is fear. But "as the hours passed and nothing terrible happened, she stopped worrying and resolved to wait calmly and see what the future would bring ... Dorothy soon closed her eyes and fell fast asleep."

Sleep can be a time of peacefulness or terror. Every so often when I am just about to fall asleep I find myself in a strange state between wakefulness and sleep. Sometimes in this half-slumber I feel I am in a life-threatening situation - falling off a cliff or about to be hit by a truck. I wake up with a cry. My heart is pounding. I am grateful that these night terrors come rarely, and so is my family, for I nearly frighten them to death when I wake screaming with palpable fear.

In the Talmud we read that "sleep is one-sixtieth of death."¹ The truth conveyed is that every night and day we face the thin line between death and life. We do not generally dwell on it. With bills to pay, dinners to cook, kids to take care of and work to do it is easiest to ignore it. But the thin line of death and life is there, nonetheless, as we try to live as if a storm will never come.

Of course, they do ... for all of us.

What is the anchor that helps ground us against despair? What keeps us from seeing the world as a random and meaningless flow of happenstance? And when life does not turn out as we want, how can we live with a sense of purpose?

2200 years ago Shimon HaTzaddik suggested a way to help us answer these questions. "The world depends on three things," he began, alluding to what it means to live a rich and integrated life. It is a life open, first, to intellectual pursuit (*al ha-Torah*); second, to being attentive to others (*al g'milut hasadim*) and then, one more thing. This third component - *avodah* - is often translated as "prayer", though it literally means "service". What Shimon teaches, then, is that to be whole we must hone not only our mind and heart, but our soul, to become more spiritually aware.

What does it mean to develop a spiritual life? First, a life of the spirit is rooted in a soul spiritually open enough to seek something beyond physical reality, open (in other words) to the possibility of God. Second, Judaism is a spiritual path that affirms a world created with order, though incomplete. Finally, despite the imperfect nature of the universe a Jewish soul still sees good and meaning to life.

¹ Babylonian Talmud *Berachot* 57b

The Possibility of God

An atheist was quietly fishing in Scotland when his boat was suddenly attacked by the Loch Ness monster. The beast tossed the man and his boat high into the air and opened its mouth to swallow both. As he sailed head over heels, he cried out, "Oh, my God! Help me!"

Suddenly, the ferocious attack froze in place. As the atheist hung in mid-air, a booming voice called out, "I thought you didn't believe in Me!"

"Come on God, give me a break," the man pleaded. "Two minutes ago I didn't believe in the Loch Ness monster either."

Not only is belief in God tough, just talking about God makes lots of us uncomfortable. It is easy to speak about being "spiritual" and wanting a sense of "meaning" in our lives. Jews, like all people, are spiritual seekers and searchers. We are into meditating, finding inner strength in yoga and kabbala (even if we are not quite sure what it is except that Madonna and Demi Moore are into it, so how bad can it be?). For many Jews, however, God-talk is tough.

Recent surveys indicate that 97% of Americans consider themselves religious or spiritual and 79% believe in God. But if you break down the numbers a little, some fascinating differences emerge. Ten percent of Protestants and 21 percent of Roman Catholics do not believe in God. For Jews, the figure is a remarkable 52 percent. "I am resigned to the fact that I am a God-forsaken non-believing Jew," wrote Sigmund Freud, speaking for a great many of us.²

Perhaps the problem is that we have seen how religion, when linked to political power, is so often twisted into something repressive and fanatical. We Jews, descendents of those tortured and killed when religious institutions had the power to rule, have reason aplenty to be wary of those who seek to wed national policy with an uncompromising and uniform religious point of view.

Or maybe it is just that we Jews, seeking a faith that is intellectually sound and well-grounded, just find it impossible to talk with any certainty about God. Rather than saying anything, then, we say nothing. In some ways, whatever we say is both too little and too much. The Roman Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas spent a good part of his life writing his *Summa Theologica*. When asked why he abandoned the work in his old age,

² Center for Research on Religion and Spiritual Society/Gallup Spiritual Index, June 2003; Harris Poll, Nov. 2003

he related the following dream. An angel was emptying the ocean with a teaspoon. Aquinas asked what he was doing. The angel replied: "Theology."

In Jewish thought the paradox of God-talk has led to similar reflections. Yet even with the uncertainty of what to say, Jews have found in a somewhat unknowable and inexpressible Divine that which can anchor us against the storms. Thus, the eleventh century poet Shlomo ibn Gabirol wrote:

שָׁחַר אֶבְקֶשְׁךָ, צוֹרֵי וּמִשְׁגָּבִי
 I look for you early, my rock and my refuge,
 Offering you worship morn and night;
 Before your vastness I come confused and afraid ...
 Yet still for You a human song is good
 And so I praise You
 as long as there is within me נְשִׁמַת אֱלֹהִים - the 'divine breath.'

Ibn Gabirol's willingness to live with the uncertainty - yet affirm the possibility - is a powerful expression of Jewish faith. His play on the Hebrew word for "soul" - *nishama* - is intimately linked with the word for "breath" - *nishima*.

In fact, the most intimate name for God is connected with every breath we take. While there are many names for God, the most sacred of all is written with the four Hebrew letters *yod, hey, vav, hey*. In ancient days only the High Priest would utter that Name and only on Yom Kippur, and even then only in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. Later traditions guard us from saying that Name and vocalize the letters in a way that would have us utter instead the name "Adonai" (which literally means "my master"). All these fences around the Name may help preserve the honor due God, but it may hide us from the profound insight the name provides.

Modern scholars believe that the way these letters were pronounced was *Yahweh*. And what is this? Try something if you will. Open your mouth wide and take in a deep breath. Now let it out. Breath in, breath out. Breath in - *yah*, breath out - *weh*. Our "soul", then, is the breath of life we take in from the moment we are born until the last exhalation from our lungs. Just as we are not the air, yet it is the air that we take in and which courses through our blood that keeps us alive, so is God not us, yet the One whose possibility sustains us. As ibn Gabirol understood, every breath we take is, in essence, a praise of the divine.

The Holiness of an Imperfect World

A sense of incompleteness is built into the warp of Jewish life. At a *brit milah* we do not traditionally say a *shehecheyanu* (the prayer for a joyous experience), a subtle

reminder that while we rejoice that a new child has entered the covenant, he is not exactly feeling so happy right then. At a wedding a glass is shattered to recall our people's brokenness, a hint that no marriage is without struggles. There is even a custom among some Jews of leaving a small portion of a house unfinished - a sign of a world in need of repair. This sanctification of imperfection stands as a counterbalance to the notion that there is a divine symmetry in life, that everything works out equitably - blessings for the righteous and punishment for the wicked.

Much (although not all) of the Bible is founded in this idea of moral justice. And it is a belief that remains strong in our time. Even as Katrina was roaring ashore we heard religious figures of all kinds proffering religious justification for its devastation. Some evangelical Christian leaders pontificated about how the hurricane was punishment for America's support of abortion, noting how it looked like an unborn fetus. There were Islamic fundamentalists who claimed it was a divine scourge against the "Great Satan." Even one of Israel's former chief rabbis saw it as retribution for American support for the Israeli disengagement from Gaza.

How comforting it must be to so clearly know God's thoughts ... and how naïve! Does not this certain view of the world as just wither in the face of reality? Is not the nightly news an indictment against a faith that asserts that the innocent do not suffer? The Bible itself gives voice to the moral imbalance of life. Thus, Job cries out: "Why do those who do wrong live *and* become old, indeed, become mighty in power ... Their houses safe from fear and the rod of God not come upon them?"³

Over time, a strong current developed in Jewish thought which argued for a spiritual perspective that accepts a world of imperfect moral balance. In the Talmud a story is told of Elisha ben Abuyah, who saw a young boy fall off a ladder and die while engaged in performing a mitzvah. Upon witnessing this tragic event Elisha denied the existence of God and declared: "there is no justice and there is no Judge."⁴ Yet the Talmudic passage concludes the ladder was probably rickety, and says that one should not rely on miracles when involved in something that is likely to result in injury.

Elsewhere in the Talmud the rabbis challenge a simplistic moral algebra even more. They ask: "Suppose a man steals a measure of wheat and plants it in his own field. It would be right that the wheat not grow." After all, it is stolen. But the passage ends by

³ Job 21:7-9

⁴ Babylonian Talmud *Kiddushin* 39b

saying that the wheat will sprout anyway, because "nature pursues its normal course - *olam k'minhago noheg*."⁵ Nature, in other words, is ethically neutral. Earthquakes, hurricanes and viruses do not distinguish between the righteous and the wicked; bombs fall on the innocent because of the law of gravity, brakes tragically fail and cars crash not because God is plotting the action but because that is the way the world works.

In another passage the rabbis went even further: "There is death without sin and there is suffering without transgression."⁶ Is this not a *chutzpadik* statement of faith?! Life is not fair. Children die before their time, good people lose their homes, there is no easy explanation for why some get sick and others do not. The discerning soul understands that God does not reward and punish as we deserve. This, then, is a spiritual stance of challenge that can resonate with souls who question the randomness of life. This is a faith that allows for suffering without falling back on easy, sanctimonious answers.

The holiness of our incomplete world is reflected in a poem by Danny Siegel:

Praised be the Lord of imperfection,
Your flaws are everywhere
In the elms unbalanced foliage,
And the asymmetric faces of Your creatures.
You form the ripping floods
That tear the forest
And bend tornadoes in a twisted dance,
The lion is blotched with age and mud
And the Shabbat silverware lies stained
Praised be your torah of scratches and scars.
Praised by your discolorations,
For they are puzzles and poems of your sacred character.

If, however, life is imperfect - and unpredictable - where can we find the courage to give meaning to our days? How can a soul - adrift in a world awash in uncertainty - find a place to find anchor? This, then, leads us to the final place we must come to in developing a spiritual life - to accept life's goodness even if it is not always so.

Life Can Be Good

I will never forget how angry I felt when, after the death of our baby, someone said, "You're young. Don't worry. You can have another." I know that they were trying to say life would feel alright again, but how foolish it was for them to try to defend God's

⁵ Babylonian Talmud *Avodah Zarah* 54b

⁶ Babylonian Talmud *Shabbat* 55b

justice and life's goodness while we were in such pain. One of the great pieces of rabbinic wisdom is not to try to appease a person when they are upset or to comfort someone in the midst of dealing with death.⁷ It is callous in the extreme to say to one who has suffered a great loss that life is good.

Yet one of the great truths of Jewish faith is that there is a possibility of renewal, forgiveness and goodness. There is blessing in life - and the storm clouds of despair can be followed by days of radiant calm.

There is a debate in Jewish tradition about whether the rainbow Noah saw after the Flood was the first that ever appeared, or whether he just saw it in a new way at that moment. The first view relegates the rainbow to the realm of the miraculous. The second suggests that there is balance built into the fabric of the universe - that even in the midst of devastation and destruction, there can be glimmers of beauty and rebirth. Storms there are, but life can be renewed and hope restored.

When I was in Israel last February I was witness to an amazing moment of grace during a visit to the Knesset, Israel's parliamentary seat. After several hours of meetings, the small group I was with was prevented from leaving and told to wait at the bottom of a staircase. At the top were two rows of police officers, wearing their formal uniforms. A few minutes passed and, suddenly, everyone stood at attention. Through the phalanx of police walked the German President Horst Koehler, on the first such visit by the President of Germany to the State of Israel. It was almost to the day 60 years before when Allied troops liberated Auschwitz, and looked into the face of the hell created by the Nazis. On this day, however, the head of Germany strode into the Knesset, the representative body of the Jewish State, side by side with the Prime Minister and President of Israel, flanked by Jewish policeman.

President Koehler began his remarks in Hebrew and then continued in German. In his address, he told the Israeli parliament that responsibility for the Holocaust was an integral part of his country's national identity, and cautioned that the battle against anti-Semitism had not been won. He also noted Germany's support of Israel and its right to exist and defend itself against Arab aggressors. He concluded, "Germany stands unswervingly side by side with Israel and its people."

If someone had said in the days after the liberation of the death camps, that Jewish police would guard the head of Germany in a Jewish land, and that he would affirm

⁷ Rabbi Shimon ben Eliezer, *Pirke Avot* 4:23

German affiliation with the Jews, we would have laughed at the possibility. Yet I have witnessed such a thing. And if this happened, we can take faith that similar progress can be made with those who are our enemies today. Forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration of relationships - these are the wellsprings of the soul.

When the soul becomes conscious of life's goodness, does that take away the sting of loss? Of course not. Dorothy survives the cyclone and enters a land of great beauty, but she comes to see that Oz has its own good and bad. Noah bears witness to the rainbow and rebuilds, but his survival does not guarantee a life without struggle. So is it true for all of us. Life's tempests threaten to engulf us, the troubles that beset us can shake us to the core of our being, but we have the power to rebuild ourselves. And then another challenge comes, setting us back. So we build again. And with each success in turning ourselves around, in reaching out in righteous deeds and in finding help in God, we find that we have the power to determine our fate. This is our struggle ... this is our glory.

These, then, are the truths that fortify the soul - an openness to God's possibility, an acceptance of the world's imperfection and the understanding that there is, despite all the pain, also great blessing in being alive.

In *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, "the Great and Terrible" wizard turns out in the end to be "just a common man." He is not the only one who hides his true self. Dorothy's three companions are just the same. "How about my courage?" the Lion asks. "You have plenty of courage, I am sure," answered Oz. "All you need is confidence in yourself ... True courage is facing danger when you are afraid." To be truly whole we need to have the confidence to look at the essence of who we are.

We have been given so many gifts - our mind, our heart, our soul. Let us not leave the gifts unopened, but have the wisdom to see them, the compassion to give them and the strength of will to appreciate them each and every day.

And let us take in the "divine breath" that is the source of all [breath in], each breath a praise of the gifts we are given and the One who gives them: כל הנשמה תהלל יה