

THE NEW SHUL / Erev Rosh Hashanah 5768 (2007)

Sermon by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein

B'ruchim ha-ba'im b'shem Adonai— Blessed are each and every one of you who have come to this sacred space at this most holy of times. You, who sit with family, friends, and fellow travelers, are welcome and *wanted*, as the Book of Life turns another leaf and as we all begin the inner pilgrimage of the Days of Awe.

It has become a part of my rabbinic practice over the past few years, to take the opportunity of using this pulpit— and this ancient, beautiful moment at the start of a new Jewish year— to try to set a tone for the next season, and to establish a key *theme* that will run, not just through the High Holy Days, but from this Rosh Hashanah until the next.

I have challenged us to open our *tents*, as did Abraham and Sarah, and to welcome the strangers among us. I have urged us to open our *hearts*, as did David and Solomon, and to act with empathy and compassion. *This year, 5768*, I present you with a new task, a challenge as well as an opportunity— I ask you to open your *minds*, and to open them in ways you never imagined.

Do you believe in God? At this time, as we enter the Days of Awe— with all the sanctity and holiness of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, and all the rites, rituals, and spiritual ideas associated with them— you'd think that God is *all* Jews believe in. If somebody were to judge us by this liturgy, as well as our daily, Shabbat, and festival prayers, the answer to my question would seem pretty clear-cut to an outsider: we Jews are a people of the most unwavering *theism* in the whole world.

But I'm a rabbi—I know better. Despite some significant exceptions, this ain't the majority belief of the Jewish community I know and love. After 14 years in the field as an ordained rabbi, and based on a decade of work in the congregational rabbinate— combined with my personal experiences of lecturing to, speaking with, and writing about Jewish men and women all over America— I see us as a people who are truly “stiff-necked” when it comes to serious discussion about, let alone belief in, a deity. These days, we're pretty sure of our own rightness and pretty dismissive of God.

In a world roiling with suffering and violence, and amidst the death and devastation in Iraq, Darfur, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, the obvious (and age-old) question that comes up over and over again among those of us who live in this disturbing era is: *Where is God in the face of all this horror?* It's a valid and powerful question, and a profound challenge to those of us who *do* believe in the reality of the Divine. For Jews, it is arguably at its most personal and jagged when we remember and reflect on the Holocaust.

But the Torah itself can be a trigger for this question, the same sacred text that we'll read here tomorrow morning.

A few months ago, one of you asked me a question on our blog site in response to a piece I'd written about my experience as a chaplain at Ground Zero in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, and how I'd seen a kind of spirituality, or "godliness," in the eyes and actions of those around me at that unforgettable, apocalyptic scene.

"How is it that God, who is credited with creating everything in the universe, is only responsible for the *good* things in it and never the bad things? Wouldn't he have created both the darkness *and* the light? and how is it that that same God, the genocidal killer in the Bible who burns, stabs, drowns, and slaughters so many people, is now to be seen only (and here *I* am quoted) in 'acts of love and compassion?' It seems, to me, an irreconcilable disconnect."

Whew—you guys can be a pretty tough crowd. The following was my response: "The questions you raise have been asked for centuries, so you're in good company. But there is no single answer to them— some thinkers have actually argued that God *is* as present as much in the darkness as in the light, and they have explanations as to why. As to your second point, it all depends on how you perceive Scripture. If you view it as myth rather than literal fact, then obviously those depictions of God you note have far more to do with the human *imagination* than they do with God."

What was I trying to convey through my words? That unless or until we can move beyond, or at least *struggle* with, these questions in a serious, non-polemical way, we will stay *mired* in our own theological baggage and *paralyzed* as a people of faith.

The classic, mainstream answer as to how to reconcile the concept of a good God with the constant presence of evil in the world is to argue that the latter is the price we must pay for having personal autonomy, for the freedom to *choose*. God did not want to create automatons, so it is up to *us* as to how we utilize that freedom— and, too often, we use it in barbaric and savage ways. That is not related to God, or to God's goodness— the true blame lies with each of us.

The kabbalists had a different, mystical approach. They argued that the world contains holy "sparks," everywhere and in everything, elements of the divine that were spread throughout the universe at the primeval moment of creation. This "Big Bang" cosmological myth (which dates back to the 16th century) claims that what we *perceive* as evil is actually only evil at the surface level, that, in actuality, it is holiness in a latent state— and that it is up to us to kindle the hidden, dormant divinity that inheres within all of the terrible actions, events, and individuals that we see around us.

Neither of these answers is fully satisfactory to me, and I'm sure I'm not alone. As Jews, we belong to a deeply *dialogical* tradition— questioning and intellectual exploration are *embedded* in our existential DNA. The Talmud, for instance, debates internally on many and varied religious and moral issues, but it doesn't offer clear-cut, neat and clean resolution to any of them— it tolerates, even embraces, *uncertainty*. Unlike the far more doctrinal traditions of Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, and Islam, *Judaism* is, at its

core, about mixing it up with each other in the shadowy muck and mire of our collective minds, not about accepting fixed, absolute, “infallible” truths.

Yet this is an era of polarization, of black-and-white, either-or approaches to our problems and concerns. and so, with no intellectual wiggle room, Jews as a group—especially liberal ones, like us, a theologically ambivalent demographic to begin with—have tended to favor the pole of *negation* when it comes to these matters, the “No” answer to God’s existence, rather than risk the rigid certitude of the “Yes” answer—which to many of us seems arrogant, almost aggressive. What contemporary Jew in his or her right mind would have the *hubris* to proclaim, “I believe in God, and I hold this belief beyond any and all doubt”? It just doesn’t feel authentic or honest—it doesn’t feel, for lack of a better word, Jewish.

And yet, we must not fall prey to the current trend in our culture on this topic—the false dichotomies of either a rigid *fundamentalism* or a dogmatic *atheism*. Tragically, sometimes horrifically (particularly in the world of Islamic extremists), we see the fruits of the former ideology hard at work every night on television. But the latter ideology, while not as gruesome or as physically dangerous, is still disturbing, still an outgrowth of the kind of closed-mindedness that can, at times, slide toward fanaticism.

Some of the best-selling and most attention-grabbing “religion” books in recent years have been mercilessly devoted to attacking and trying to debunk any grounds whatsoever for believing in a higher power—books such as Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Christopher Hitchens’s *God is Not Great*. For them, belief in God is treated as either primitive or completely idiotic. The dismissive attitudes and vitriolic emotions within the pages of these books are palpable and relentless, and they say far more about the authors’ personalities than they do about God’s existence.

Always, but especially in divisive times like these, we need to have open minds. We are all-too-aware of the closed-mindedness, and the dangers, among religious fundamentalists and extremists. But let’s be honest with ourselves—there are a lot of people out there, including a disproportionate number of Jews (some of whom are in this very room), who are *just* as dogmatic, extreme, and “fundamentalist” about their atheism. and that’s *exactly* what we need to break free from—this contemporary American culture of dichotomies.

Our *disbelief* in God is, on so many different levels, a symptom of, and a reaction to, the polarized society and zeitgeist in which we live. What we as a community must do is *resist* this either-or, extremist mindset—we’re just too smart to buy into such lunacy, and too experienced to accept such unbending views. We must return to, and reclaim, our uniquely *Jewish* culture of dialogue, and debate.

Who says we have to give Yes or No responses? Let’s answer Yes *and* No. That’s what the sages of the Talmud frequently did—why shouldn’t we?

In my personal opinion, a kind of “skeptical theism” is our best approach to the God Question in this new and unsettling century. Nearly 100 years ago, the great Rav Kook, Palestine’s first Chief Rabbi (since the State of Israel hadn’t yet come into being) argued that, to look at the world— with all of its violence, suffering, injustice, poverty, hunger, and darkness— and *not* experience at least a flicker of what he termed “temporary atheism” was *itself* a sin, for it demonstrated a hardened and indifferent heart. In light of the human condition, having serious doubts about God’s presence and/or existence, according to Rav Kook, is not only acceptable— it is a sign of an insightful, sensitive, empathetic, and caring soul.

In other words, *ambiguity*, even in matters of faith, is okay.

Judaism is an old religion with strong rebel roots. Since antiquity, our teachings and values have often run *counter* to the prevailing trends and ideas of the cultures we lived in or among. Our ancestors advocated justice over oppression, freedom over subservience, dialogue over dogma, and, yes, monotheism over idolatry— belief in a “non-God.”

So what is my message now, on this sacred night? Let’s try to *recapture* our countercultural, *rebel* foundations. Let’s aim not to please, but to *provoke*, to push boundaries, to reject knee-jerk, rigid, party-line ways of thinking. For me, the bottom line is this: To believe in (or seriously entertain the idea of) the reality of a living God in this overly rationalistic, narcissistic, and materialistic day and age— even a God we can wrestle with, question, and, at times, *doubt*— is about as bold, and *revolutionary*, as it gets.

Reclaiming the fundamentals of being Jewish, w/o morphing into Jewish fundamentalists, can seem a challenge for modern believers. But it is also our best (and perhaps last) bet for trying to construct the world of compassion, meaning, direction, and hope that so many of us today so desperately crave.

And so, as in previous years at this time, I have a homework assignment for every one of us in this room, and I ask that you start it the second you walk out the front doors. You don’t have to “do” anything— but, perhaps even more difficult, you have to *think* something, you have to pry open those minds that most of you probably think are so progressive, and place yourselves in what may be a zone of discomfort.

I ask you, from tonight until Yom Kippur, to challenge your assumptions about God, to question, not belief, but *your* beliefs. If you don’t believe in God, spend the next 10 days asking yourself why. If you’re one of those who *do* believe, ask yourself on what grounds you have faith. Try to use this period, these Days of Awe, to explore, to question, to doubt— to make a journey within your mind and soul.

If you can’t even imagine believing in God, just *pretend* for a while and see how it feels— I know we have some trained actors here. You have absolutely nothing to lose but your own dogmatism and self-satisfaction. This is an exercise, an experiment, and

there are no rules. See where this inner journey takes you, see what makes you uncomfortable— then *dive* into that feeling of discomfort.

Taking a leap into the unknown, into uncertainty— to call into question something you think you are *dead* right about— is a strange and sometimes scary experience. Who wants to shake things up, to mess around with what feels comfortable and secure? Who wants to risk losing their sure footing?

Those who are willing to *push* themselves, to *grow* as human beings. How will you ever know if your deep-seated assumptions are right if you're too stubborn, or too scared, to *challenge* them? And what's the worst that could happen if, after 10 days of experimentation, it turns out that you *can* allow just a little bit of God into your life? What would be so bad about discovering some new guidance, hope, even faith? I guarantee you would never see the world in the same way again.

I ask you tonight to be bold, to take a risk. Let's open our minds, because I can tell you firsthand that they are *not* as open as we like to think they are. Stay open about God, about organized religion, about your real, true, genuine commitment to this wonderful, intimate shul.

Our community is a sanctuary, a safe haven, a place where all are welcome, where no questions are off the table, but where we must remain ever vigilant against *complacency*. As your rabbi, I promise you, despite my flaws, to give you the very best that is within me, to honor and address your questions, concerns, and doubts with an open mind, and an open heart. What I ask of you in *return* is that same openness, a willingness to be humble, to be vulnerable, to be challenged.

Some of the foods we rejected as children, like spinach, or maybe broccoli, now, as adults, *nourish* us and our families. This new Jewish year, let's get over our childish rejectionism, and think about God, religion, and commitment *also* as adults, in a serious, non-polemical way. We may just find out that what was once so *distasteful* to us is exactly the nourishment that we now need.