

Beyond Places like Small Jewish Communities, Where Else Can We Look for Security?

Something happens fairly often in my work as a chaplain, but not usually in the stark way in which the following scene unfolds: I've just started working at a corporate-owned, run-of-the-mill, long-term care facility. A staff person asks me to visit both an ill and elderly Jewish woman *and* her ill and elderly non-Jewish roommate. Some of you know what happens on a typical weekday morning in a corporate-owned, long-term care facility: first come the LPNs with morning meds, then the aides who change diapers and gowns and bedding, then the cleaning staff who sanitize the tiny rooms and try to lessen the smell of stale institutional food and human bodies in the process of wasting away. Then the dietary staff shows up with lunch trays around mid-morning and sometimes a social worker stops by, followed by someone from the physical therapy department who needs to check something with the social worker who's just left, and so on.

Because others are busy with the Jewish resident, I visit with the Gentile woman first. *Please*, says the non-Jewish woman earnestly as she takes my hand in both of hers. *Please, pray for me. I'm sick, my son isn't doing well either, and I need your prayers. Will you please pray for me and for my family? I don't mind if you don't pray in English, the words go to the same place. We pray to the same God, after all.* I sit with her awhile and pray something akin to our *mi sh'berakh* and then I sing some verses from the psalms, beginning with my long-time favorite, a line from Psalm 122: *Yihi shalom b'heilekh, shalva b'armenotayikh* May there be well-being within your ramparts, peace in your citadels.

Then I walk to the other bed, closing the privacy curtain between the two women as I go. The Jewish woman manages to sit up a little. She begins the conversation: *What did you say your name was?* "Rabbi Kirshbaum." *I don't know any Kirshbaums. Are you married? Does your husband have a different last name like they do nowadays?* I decide to answer everything she asks; my partner happens to be a man and he happens to be Jewish, two facts which make for an easier reply to someone born in the 1920s, a reply that won't require further explanation. His last name is Friedler, I say. *Oh, Friedler*, the Jewish woman says. *I knew some Friedlers on Long Island*, the woman adds. *Is he from Long Island? Did his father own a bakery? What does your husband do?* No, I say; his father was a printer in New Haven, from a long line of printers. Maybe even scribes before that. My husband's a professor of mathematics.

But before I can offer her a *mi sh'berakh*, or sing to her, or even ask about what she needs, her eyes begin to close. She says, *Come back another time, you're very nice, I hope to see you again. I'm tired now.* The only thing that this frail and failing Jewish woman and I have done together besides make basic contact is to play one round of Jewish geography. And not a very fruitful round at that. Maybe I've credentialed myself a little by mentioning my husband and his profession, something that this woman's non-Jewish roommate could care less about.

I don't mean to romanticize or privilege the response of the non-Jewish roommate. Her asking me to pray *for* her isn't what we Jews do, although I was glad to sing to her and share a paraphrase of the *mi sheberakh*, our prayer for healing. We're not meant to have a clergy class or a hierarchy of religious authorities whose job it is to pray for laypeople. I only meant to use this anecdote to consider one possible question for tonight: *What makes Jews - not all Jews of course, but quite a few in my experience - what makes us reluctant to ask for help from anyone or anything beyond close family or friends and what makes us expect help, by and large, only from health professionals when we're in crisis or decline?* I hope you'll think of the Jewish roommate as a stand-in for us, especially on this holy day set aside for acknowledging the fragility of life. On this day we get to think hard about how we want the rest of our own lives to turn out, especially given the irrefutable reality that we don't know much about when, where, or how the end of our lives will turn out. What we do know is that, barring unexpected death, people tend to die pretty much the way they've lived.

Yom Kippur also reminds us: it's not too late to *change* how we live! And if we're stranded in a run-of-the-mill long-term care facility or even if we find ourselves in better circumstances at the end of our lives, will it be enough for us to play Jewish geography with the chaplain or idly pass the time otherwise while the TV is blaring? Will we feel constrained to keep silent about what we really need - the need to feel understood and loved, the need to know that

our lives are precious, that our time on earth has been meaningful, and our health is absolutely worth praying for? If at the moment of our death we happen to be without family or friends, who or what will lessen our loneliness, fear, and pain? Is it even possible for post-Holocaust Jews to find comfort in asking for help from an inherently inscrutable source formerly known as God? Is it possible for us to leave this world with a sense of security despite the wild uncertainty about what lies beyond our own brief lives?

What makes us liberal Jews so estranged, on the whole, from what we might call the religious side of our tradition? Why do many of us find prayer to be an obstacle to living Jewishly? Why for some of us is it such a steep price to pay for membership in Jewish communal life? Before posing this as a serious question for our consideration, I want to state something very clearly first: I am *not* trying to turn atheists into agnostics or agnostics into believers. I'm not a campaign manager for the Almighty. I am *not* trying to encourage belief, or argue for belief, or insinuate the superiority of belief. I myself am not currently a *believer* as such. Belief as a topic for debate or speculation really bores me. If anything, I've been pleasantly surprised by all-too-infrequent intimations that the universe seems to be a 'believer' in human beings. Even more surprising have been those tiny, subtle, all-too-infrequent intimations that the universe seems to *believe in me* and in the worthiness of my growth as a human being. But more than that, I'm in a place, intellectually and emotionally speaking, where 'belief' is actually irrelevant. I'll share a little about that tomorrow. Again, I want to assure you, I'm *not* in the belief business, I'm not looking to lead a congregation of believers. Believe me!

But I do see myself as being in the security business, that's to say, in the very Jewish business of increasing trust, increasing faith in the future, increasing confidence and a sense of protection. I do think I have a responsibility to help other Jews take their worry and fear and turn it instead into *bakasha* - asking for help. I do think I have a responsibility to help fellow Jews ask, *what does it mean to let go enough to ask for help?* What does it mean to let go of the myth of self-sufficiency that seems so all-important in the wider culture in which we find ourselves?

It's getting late, we have a long day ahead; we'll look at these questions tomorrow. For now, I only want to offer several possible reasons for our *discomfort* with the idea of looking for comfort in prayer. I invite you to think about whether any of these reasons feels familiar to you.

*The appropriation of all things religious by fundamentalists of all stripes, and with it the trivialization in politics and popular culture of, supposedly, God's will.

*Our Cartesian inheritance: *I think, therefore I am* and with it, the placing of consciousness in a context no more spacious than our own little minds.

*The ascendancy of materialism, and with it, a *scientism* that has stripped the world of its sacred, mysterious dimension, asserting that all things can ultimately be known by human beings.

*The medicalization of dying and with it, the lack of first-hand, repeated experience with death and the fragility of all life.

*The death of distance and with it, our lack of a tether to traditional ideas of space, time, and physical connection.

*Jewish self-awareness and our love of questioning, which includes the freedom to argue with God.

But today conceptions of the Unseen tend toward the crude and ignorant, mitigated less and less by what the 20th century philosopher Alfred North Whitehead identified as religion: namely, the transition from God the Void to God the Enemy and from God the Enemy to God the Companion. So today, or literally yesterday, in the online Jewish magazine known as *The Tablet*, there was the usual Yom Kippur rant that goes: first, God, You atone for all You've screwed up, then maybe we'll feel like atoning to You.

*but perhaps above all, it's the modern Jew's memory of - and first- or at least second-hand experience of - the Holocaust and with it, the lingering belief in an idea of God as Abuser-in-Chief, or at least as the Supreme Master of Abandonment.

Here at String of Pearls, however, I'm happy to report a breakthrough. Or perhaps I should describe it as a break-out from the confining corner into which we contemporary liberal Jews have mostly painted ourselves. Last autumn, some of us met in our *sukkah* to initiate a conversation about messaging for our congregation. It seemed to us that a lot of people in the greater Princeton area knew all about who we *aren't*, but not much about who we *are* and are striving to *become*. Aply led by member Gail Szenes, we met again and again until we'd come up with several brief

statements about our congregation. The one that gives me much, much hope is this: *String of Pearls – a garden for the Jewish soul*.

Notice that it doesn't say 'String of Pearls – a garden for the Jewish *self*' but rather, a garden for the Jewish *soul*. The Jewish soul, the *n'shuma!* This is nourishing language indeed for our tongues, parched as they are from both an arid sophistication and a sense of real abandonment, too dry to call out for help from beyond the confines of what we think we know.

On Rosh haShana we looked at the notion of security through one particular Jewish lens, the lens of trust. Tomorrow we'll look at security through another Jewish lens, the lens of faith and doubt. In the meantime, I wish you a decent night's sleep and a *tzom kal*, literally, an 'easy fast'.

Yom Kippur

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***Dor Ha-flaga* and the Challenge of a Traditional Kind of Jewish Security**

If you weren't with us for Rosh haShana, here's a summary of the three sermons so far. They've all been based on this year's theme – Security and Jewish Responses to the Idea of Security. On Erev Rosh haShana, I attempted to expose the danger of our national and sometimes personal pursuit of security as if it were a *thing*, a commodity that we could somehow come to possess. Security is a feeling and a mighty fine one at that, but like all feelings, it is fleeting. I also noted that the Latin roots of the word security mean freedom-from-care, and I hope I shared adequately why this idea is so foreign to Jewish thought. In a nutshell, I said that the most foundational Jewish idea is that of *brit* or partnership with The One who created us. According to the Jewish understanding, the world is half God's responsibility and half ours. In this Jewish way of thinking, there's no such thing as freedom-from-care for any human being since we all must take responsibility to uphold the human end of the deal – which is to help fix the world's brokenness.

On Rosh haShana morning, I offered one of several Jewish alternatives to security, one that happens to be an actual *thing* – although not a material thing. That first Jewish alternative, I suggested, is trust, *bitachon*. And that a small synagogue is a good place to build relationships based on trust.

But what about job security? Isn't it something real that too many of us need desperately? Yes, of course. But our tradition is far more concerned with finding and addressing the root causes of unemployment and under-employment than finding ways to *feel* more secure. Even in as early a text as *VaYikra*, the Torah's 3rd book, Leviticus, we learn that one of the primary responsibilities of government is to redistribute wealth from the very rich to the rest of us and to make periodic structural adjustments in order that that wealth doesn't pool among the few.

Last night I suggested that Judaism offers another alternative to security; namely, the *confidence* [*eimun*, in Hebrew] that ought to enable us Jews to ask for help from the inherently inscrutable source formerly known as God. But we're, by and large, extremely reluctant to ask for that kind of help. In my experience, this kind of confidence doesn't even seem accessible to many post-Holocaust, liberal Jews. I also listed some possible reasons for that lack of access. I included among them the nearness of the Holocaust and with it, the lingering belief in God as Abuser-in-Chief, or at least as the Supreme Master of Abandonment.

Today I want to look at *eimun*, confidence, an enduring Jewish substitute for security, beginning with a small story told by Rabbi Naomi Levy in a book of hers called *To Begin Again*:

Sam's grandmother, who owned a small hotel, needed to hire someone with a horse and cart to run errands for her business. When a man came to apply for the job, she asked him this question: "What would you do if you were riding somewhere and a heavy obstacle was blocking the road?" The man replied, "I would get out of the cart and move it out of my way." Sam's grandmother asked, "But what if it was too heavy to move?" The man responded, "Then I would try to steer the horse around it." Sam's grandmother said, "What if there was no way around it?" "Then I would turn back." Sam's grandmother said "Thank you," then showed the man out. When she closed the door, she told Sam the man didn't get the job. Sam was puzzled. The man had seemed nice enough and he really needed the work. But his grandmother said, "He didn't give the right answer." Sam asked, "What did he say that was wrong?" His grandmother explained, "we don't live by ourselves in this world. If you're in trouble, you go for help."

I shared this story with the 5th/6th grade students in our Hebrew School a couple weeks ago and, interestingly enough, not one child thought of going to ask for help as the right answer. It seemed to me that day as if even our 11-year-olds sense that self-sufficiency is the name of the game.

But mainstream Jewish thought doesn't have skin in that game. Or more accurately, when Jewish thinkers have tried to leave behind the other half of the *brit* relationship, that attempt has not, broadly speaking, scored many points. Arguably, our most foundational idea after all is *brit*, partnership, with the inscrutable source of life formerly known as God. In the classical Jewish worldview we know we're not alone in the universe as individuals or as a species and we expect to be able to call out for help. But as I've been saying, our generation seems to feel all alone. Quite alone. And so we can't or won't call out. By and large, I sense that we think of ourselves as too sophisticated to believe that if we cry out, something in the universe will hear us. And we should not surrender that sophistication. But that's not the confidence that's really been lost to us. Rather I'd prefer to think of it as a distinctly Jewish *faith in the idea* that if we cry out, something *in us* will change.

When we ask, for example, in the *Avinu Malkeinu*, for *parnasa and kalkala* – a living and a lively-hood – we're not asking for some kind of magic to go to work in our favor on something called the Almighty. When we're able to sing *Avinu Malkeinu* as a real cry for help, we've already begun to change. That's when our posturing and our pretenses and our rationalizing, our lusts and our illusions, the desires that others have foisted on us, begin to fall away.

Here's how Rabbi Michael Samuel expresses the importance of crying out for help in his brave book called *The Lord is my Shepherd – the Theology of a Caring God*:

When a person experiences loss, this suffer[ing person] must find a way to express and identify his [or her] suffering. If the sufferer cannot talk about [her or] his affliction, she or he will be destroyed by it or else will be consumed by apathy. To become speechless is to be totally without relationship; [as the Psalmist says], death is a state of silence.

Victims of trauma often feel trapped in a prison of silence. Their healing must begin with speech. The language of lament and crying has always allowed healing to begin. Lament has traditionally been one of the primal forms of Jewish prayer. Feeling negativity, asking uncomfortable questions, are part and parcel of the spiritual journey back to health. The verbalization of pain is extremely important, not just for individuals who suffer, but for the community that suffers. ...If speechlessness [is] comparable to death, then speech may also serve as a metaphor for re[birth].

In my experience, many of us post-Holocaust Jews have not yet had restored to us the confidence that we can be in relationship with anything larger than our families and friends, our communities and clubs and – in times of crisis or decline – our doctors and other allied health professionals. Such confidence, *emun* in Hebrew, would allow us to use prayer to cry out to the other half of what used to be known as a human-divine partnership. On the whole, our generation of Jews is mute, and for several good reasons, I think. For one, the concepts of faith and prayer have been so thoroughly appropriated by others with agenda far less gentle than our own. For another, some of us associate faith and prayer with a kind of blinkered and smug naïvete. Another reason for our muteness, or lack of confidence that I feel we should take very seriously is the lingering idea that, for those who perished in the *Shoah*, the Holocaust, the faith and prayers of our ancestors availed them obscenely little – if at all. Obscenely little if at all.

My own understanding of *faith* is very much influenced by its root meaning, which is *firmness*. I understand faith as the firmness, the *persistence* if you will, that one needs to last through all the assaults made by that great engine that deepens faith, namely, doubt. I've sometimes joked with my children that if it were the custom for Jewish tombstones to have sayings inscribed on them, I would want mine to read: *She persisted*.

I mentioned last night that today I would share why debates about belief don't interest me in the least, even bore me. The problem I have with *belief* as such is that it contains the idea of separation within it. If you can believe – or disbelieve – in something, *you're not part of it*. For instance, we can't *believe in* Planet Earth because we can't hold it up and keep it at a distance; unless we happen to be astronauts, we're inseparable from it. This planet, our common home, simply can't belong to the realm of our belief and disbelief; it would be nonsensical to say that we choose not to believe in our planet's existence. And my own life is so bound up in Jewish life, so bound up in the Jewish worldview based on *brit* – that is, human/divine partnership – that I find I can no longer entertain ideas that involve separation. I'm Jewish through and through; all, all of life is hopelessly connected.

The rabbis who wrote the deliciously subversive genre of commentary known as *midrash* speak of two consecutive generations, *dor ha-mabul* and *dor ha-flaga*. The former refers to Noah's *dor* or generation, the generation of the flood (*dor ha-mabul*) and the latter to the following generation, that is, those who built the tower of Babel (*dor ha-*

flaga). With a few notable exceptions in this room, we are not a *dor ha-mabul*, a generation that has experienced exceptional calamity and loss. We are the following generation, the *dor ha-flaga*, the generation of separation and detachment and anxiety. How do we in our anxiousness and estrangement get past what I would call our premature avoidance or abdication of faith? For if we don't, we might end up like the Jewish woman at the corporate-owned, run-of-the-mill, long-term care facility I described to you last night: clearly wanting to make contact and not die alone but too parched to give voice to her needs, her very human needs that might have connected her to something immense and inscrutable that is at the same time as much a part of her as she is a part of it.

I don't want any of us to die feeling utterly alone. Not one single one of us. Our tradition should at least be a guarantor against that, against dying with the feeling that we are alone. For that matter, I don't want a single one of us to *live* feeling that we're alone or must suffer alone. Our tradition should at least be a guarantor against that also. I have some bare-bones ideas about how we at String of Pearls might reclaim *emunah*, confidence – this confidence, or faith, being a kind of security that outlasts even the last of one's family, friends, fellow club or community members. Come back sometime and we can flesh these ideas out together.