

**DOUBT**  
**A sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor**  
**Delivered Erev Rosh HaShana 5774**  
**Temple Beth-El, Hillsborough, NJ**

There are few things in life more intolerant or intolerable than a newly ordained young rabbi. I know this for a fact, as just about thirty years ago, I was one of those. There is another rabbi here of that vintage, but I will leave it to others to determine if he fit the mold – but I certainly did.

Having slogged through course material, listened to lectures, survived countless sermon critiques, honed my craft in student pulpits and internships, plumbed the depths (or at least the surface) of the corpus of Jewish literature – I was released upon the world with the title “ Moraynu HaRav” (Our Teacher, the Rabbi...) and I knew EVERYTHING.

Not too many weeks into my new, post-ordination job as the Assistant Director of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues, I received a phone call from the head of the Adult Education committee of one of our member synagogues, asking for a recommendation of the name of a possible lecturer who could give a weekend of lectures on the future of the Reform movement. Kibitzing with the caller, I exclaimed, “You want someone to lecture on the future of the Reform movement? I AM THE FUTURE OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT!” Luckily for me, the caller had a sense of humor. Even more luck, was the fact that the congregation – a member of the New York Region, was situated in the heart of San Juan, Puerto Rico – and that series of lectures began what would be a fruitful and loving relationship with Temple Beth Shalom of San Juan for 9 years.

And looking back on what I must have said, and believed, at the time, I am happy to note that some of my long held beliefs have proven to be true. But it was in those early days of my rabbinate that many people would opine that one day, on my matzevah (my tombstone) it will read, “He may not always have been right, but he was never in doubt.”

And as I am far closer to the time when what might be said of me will be carved on a stone, I realize how important doubt is to my maturing faith. Those moments when I was so sure of myself often turned out to be the lowest moments of my life – and as I grow older, doubt has become my best-friend for it makes me call into question all the things that really matter and of which I was once so sure. When I was young, I saw the world in Black and White – now, as I get greyer, I see the world in shades of grey.

There is something so comforting about certainty – and there are times that certainty is essential. Our youngest son, while pursuing his degree, is working as an EMT in Boston. One would hope that in an emergency, he was certain of what needed to be done – there are times when certainty guarantees an immediate response. But it is doubt that gives us pause – makes us think and reflect. It is doubt that allows us to examine an issue, a thought, a belief, an encounter.

The great Hebrew sage and folk singer, Leonard Cohen, writes in his song, “Anthem”:

Ring the bells that still can ring  
Forget your perfect offering,  
There is a crack in everything,  
That’s how the light gets in.  
(Leonard Cohen 1993)

Doubt is the crack in thought – and through the crack, light can come in. And if light doesn’t come in, it means that the light isn’t there yet. The great TV News Producer Fred Friendly, who created the PBS series Ethics in America, began each installment with the following: “Our job is not to make up anybody's mind, but to open minds, and to make the agony of decision-making so intense you can escape only by thinking.” That is what doubt does for us – it is the agony of decision making – it is the goad that makes us think.

Certainty is easy – if you know what you know then you don’t have to think. Many of us hear the expression – Kashe L’hiyot Yehudi – it is hard to be a Jew. But in recent years I have offered Kashe Lihiyot Yehudi Reformi – it is hard to be a Reform Jew, because at the heart of Reform Judaism is that existential doubt – and the demand that doubt lead to study. It is easy to be a fundamentalist (and choose the faith – fundamentalism from one faith to another is little different, do what you are told, and never doubt and you will find salvation). But the Talmud cautions us (and I wish my ultra-orthodox friends who sometimes heed what they read) Berachot 4a – “teach your tongue to say: ‘I don’t know’ – and Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhaki) one of the greatest commentators on Tanach and Talmud had one expression he used more often than any other: “Aini yodayah – I don’t know” (from Dov Peretz Elkins – the Wisdom of Judaism).

I share an example – of this I am sure: the recent struggle over the issue of access to the Western Wall for egalitarian prayer and for women’s prayer groups. I will state categorically that I support the Sharansky plan to create a contiguous section of equal size to accommodate mixed prayer groups. The efforts of Women of the Wall and others, including the Reform and Conservative movements, and the Jewish Federations of North America, have helped raise a critical issue – which is a signal act for the greater cause: which is religious tolerance and freedom in Israel – especially at our most sacred spaces. We have long fought the hegemony of the

ultra-Orthodox authorities in Israel – and we cannot tolerate in any way that the one democracy in the world in which religious discrimination against Jews is still permitted is in the land of our heritage: the State of Israel. And yet, there is something that is gnawing at me, while I continue to fight for “equal rights.” And that is this: my “equal rights” does fly in the face of those whose “traditional values” (and feel free to read in this expression the term “ultra-orthodox”) are threatened or even, offended, by the presence of mixed prayer groups, or “kol esha” (a woman’s voice). I know I am right to stand up for our rights, but I am concerned that our rights might infringe on the rights of others – and that is where doubt pricks the conscience and warns me not to be so strident in my fight for what I believe, and forced upon me the question: how is justice to be done?

Perhaps the most recent lessons in the importance of doubt come from outside of our own faith. Many here know that I am a student of other religious traditions – I learn more about myself as a Jew when I interact with others of differing religious traditions. If you were with us on Selichot, you heard me teach about the impact of election of the new pope, Francis. And if you know a little about the structure of the Roman Catholic Church, utterances from the Holy See (“seat”) carry “canonical” weight. James Carroll reported on a homily that Francis delivered in a little church outside of the Vatican in June. Carroll writes:

“...He credits the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus, but unlike preachers (including St. Paul) who restrict the benefit of Christ’s redemption to those who accept it, Francis affirms that it extends to “all of us! Not just Catholics. Everyone! ‘Father, the atheists?’ Even the atheists. Everyone!”

The world’s atheists, presumably, have not been awaiting a pope’s approval. But Francis is pulling the church away from a dangerous position; any theology that divides humanity into those who are saved and those who are not ... is a violent theology. “This ‘closing off’ that imagines those outside . . . cannot do good,” the pope said, “is a wall that leads to war and also to what some people throughout history have conceived of: killing in the name of God. . . . To say that you can kill in the name of God is blasphemy.” Faith in God, the pope reminds us here, is no guarantee of morality.

It has been a long time since popes have incited holy wars, and there is nothing new in the call to tolerate those who believe differently. But Francis’s sermon suggests a movement beyond tolerance toward an authentic pluralism in which the convictions of others are not only allowed, but valued. Instead of opposing others’ beliefs, Francis emphasizes “encounter.” The act of “doing good” is what overcomes intellectual and religious difference. For Francis, this innate capacity for virtue comes from God, but it lives in the “depths” of every heart.

Imagine that -- a Church whose theological underpinnings have always been that the path to salvation is through their doors (since 1965, Jews have their own unique path – but Protestants?????) now is led by a person who is willing to doubt that assertion. And from where he sits – that doubt carries great weight. And further, not too many weeks later, when Francis is asked about homosexuality in the priesthood, he again astounds us: “If someone is gay and he searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?” Who am I to judge????? You are the Pope – what you say, goes.

But it is the doubt factor that again comes into play and leads us to discernment – notice the construction of the response. He does not say that homosexuality is acceptable in the Church (it will take much longer for that...) – but he places the response in the conditional: IF ... someone is gay – and they search for the Lord And they do good, then judgment must come from somewhere else, but it cannot come from me. WOW!

Picking up on this, in an Editorial published August 9<sup>th</sup> in Jewish Week, Gary Rosenblatt writes: “Imagine if we routinely followed that formulation in the Jewish community, not only in terms of acceptance for gays and lesbians, but also in the many other ways in which we sit in judgment of each other.

If he genuinely loves Israel, who am I to judge how that love is expressed?

If she wishes to pray a certain way out of devotion to God, who are we to judge where and when that prayer is said?

If a community adheres to norms of behavior that are respectful but out-of-step with modern reality, who are the rest of us to judge how other Jews choose to live?

Harder to do than we may realize. But if the pope can try, perhaps we should, too.”

And lest you think that this doubt has elevated just Popes and Reform Jews, I am heartened to hear that it has even made its impress felt in the Haredi (ultra-orthodox) community. Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim, who chairs Ha’edah Hacharedit in Israel just declared that it is Chilul HaShem (a desecration of God’s name) to wear a shtreimel of animal fur. He came to this as he contemplated Tzar Balay Chaim – the infliction of needless pain on living creatures – which occurs in order to make a shtreimel and if a shtreimel is to be worn on Shabbat and Holidays to elevate the joy of the day, how can that occur when animals suffered in the process? And just yesterday, the new Ashkenazi “chief” rabbi David Lau called for better treatment of the chickens used in the pre-Yom Kippur kapparot ritual. Lau, in a letter addressed to ritual organizers and participants wrote that causing the chickens to suffer before and during kapparot would be a “mitzvah through a transgression,” which he said “was not the intention of the sages.” “I would like to remind you of the holy duty all year round to prevent any animal suffering and unnecessary pain, to make sure that they are transported properly and treated appropriately,” the letter said. (JTA September 3, 2013)

This is what we call the BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT. In June, our friend and teacher Rabbi Eric Yoffie published an opinion piece in which he asserts that Doubt is the Heart of Belief.

“Doubt does not undermine belief. It is central to belief, an indispensable part of accepting God and the mandates of a religious tradition. Even fervent believers have doubts — lots of them.... believers who are secure in their convictions must struggle with doubt. It is natural, healthy and an ongoing part of becoming comfortable with God and religious observance. It is also inevitable. In the world in which we live, unbelief is everywhere and an option for virtually everyone; even the most insulated religious communities, vulnerable to the invasive technologies of the modern world, cannot escape it....

...Belief in God is widespread but shakier than we might think, and doubt is everywhere. Nonetheless, Americans go to churches, synagogues, mosques and other places of worship for a simple reason: They put religious experience before theology, and value religious community more than formal religious belief. They want a place of worship that embraces them, gives their life meaning and points them in the direction of the sacred. And beyond that, questions of faith will take care of themselves.

Rabbi Yoffie suggests to us that doubt is good, and the place to work out doubt is here – in community. I can tell you what I think about the way the world should be, the way we Jews should behave, how our children should be raised, what is right and wrong – but then, I look up – here – as the world is – and everything of which I was once so sure, is called into question. And it is here that I must learn to live with, and make good use of my doubt. It might lead me to change long-held beliefs that have ossified – It might cause me to change my relationship with others, or God, or myself. But doubt is never static – for doubt is the kick-start to thought, because there is nothing satisfying about doubt – and Descartes cannot be wrong when he suggested, “I think; therefore, I am.”

What leads us here year in and year out? Is it the call of the Shofar? A chance to connect with people we have not seen in a year? Or is it something deeper – that gnawing feeling that we must be here. Will our presence make a difference? What would happen to us if we didn’t show up? That is what doubt does, and it leads us here – to community – the best place in the world to work out all the questions and maybe even find answers, for now. But what doubt teaches us is that questions are eternal and answers, if they come, are temporal. And life intrudes to wake us up.

I remember long discussions with my beloved on what we expected from our life, how we might raise our children, what kind of people they would turn out to be – what values we would impart and thus, they would uphold. But every parent here knows that these are things we do not control – and once we learn that all of that is OK, then, doubt need not frighten us, but all life is there to surprise us. The Rambam (Rabbi Moses ben Maimon – 12<sup>th</sup> C) teaches (in Shmoneh Prakim), “Accept the truth from wherever it comes.”

Gilda Radner once said, "I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. Delicious Ambiguity." (Student Rabbi Jodie Gordon, based her award winning essay {WRJ essay contest} on this quotation). To which we all add, at the moment of our deepest longings - those moments when we sit in silent prayer, we conclude with: Yiheyu l'ratzon imrey fee, vehegyon libi lifanecha, Adonai zuri v'go'ali - May the words of my mouth and the longings of my heart, [*at least*] be acceptable to You, O God - My Rock and My Redeemer....