

## Yom Kippur: The Power of Faith

### Holocaust Story of Faith

- I once heard an amazing story from a Holocaust Survivor named Lillian
- As a 14-year-old girl
- She was taken by the Nazi's from her home in Kluge, Romania and transported to the concentration camp at Auschwitz.

### Writings

- In her writings -- Lillian recounts:
- 'Spring was in the air and even though I was living in the hell known as Auschwitz, for a moment I felt alive.
- I'd always been very religious growing up and when I was 10 years old / my father hired a tutor:
- Who taught me to read Hebrew and sing all the different prayers.

### Trade

- I'd only been at Auschwitz / for a week
- When I decided / to trade a piece of bread / for a Siddur that was tattered and torn.
- I couldn't even read the words / I could only see the Hebrew letters.

### Looking Back

- Looking back --
- I can't believe I gave up a piece of bread when I was starving.
- But I held on to that Siddur throughout my time in Auschwitz and I know that it was my Faith in God /
- It was my tattered Siddur that helped me survive.'

### Why story means so much to me

- The reason -- I find Lillian's story to be so compelling / is that she was my grandmother. And whenever I doubt God;
- Whenever, I struggle with my faith / I think of my Grandma Lil and how her belief in God and devotion to our traditions,
- Gave her the courage she needed to survive Auschwitz.

### Grandma gave me her Siddur

- My grandma gave me her siddur before she died and while I'm blessed to own many things,

- That tattered siddur
- Which I have in a safe deposit box // b/c it's very fragile is certainly my most prized possession

### **Faith is Critical**

- Faith is critical to living a fulfilled spiritual life,
- Faith is critical to our survival
- Yet, when the HH roll around,
- We tend to focus our attention in other areas.

### **Joke: Tallit/Machzor/Ticket**

- My Rabbi growing up / Rabbi Spector / used to joke
- That there are 3 things we Jews think we need to bring with us on the HH
- Our Tallit / our Machzor / and our HH Ticket

### **Punchline**

- He'd then say / if you believe this you're wrong!
- 1) B/c / if you forget your Tallit / one of the ushers will give you one
- 2) If you forget your Machzor / we'll give you one as well
- 3) And if you forget your HH ticket / then you can always come back next year.

### **Most Important thing we must bring is Faith**

- But I'll tell you
- The most important thing that we must bring with us today is our faith in God
- Our belief in God's compassion and our belief in God's mercy.
- B/c if you come to synagogue on YK -- w/o any faith,
- It's possible / this service / might mean very little to you.

### **Abraham: A Man of Faith**

- The ultimate man of faith in our tradition is Abraham (Ex: Akedah – his faith got him in trouble) (I've been critical of him)
- But it's his unwavering belief in God / that changed the world.

### **Faith Changed the World**

- B/c God tells Abraham / in Genesis 12 / 'Lech Lecha'
- "I want you to leave your homeland / your father's house /

and go to a land that I will show you”

### **No Hesitation**

- Abraham follows God’s command -- w/o hesitation.
- He trusts in God / and journeys to the land of Israel,
- A journey filled with great success  
but also, great pain and disappointment

### **Belief never Wavers**

- But his belief never wavers
- He builds a small community of monotheists
- That God promises him will be as numerous as the stars in the sky  
and today / that small community has grown to over 4 billion people.
- For Abraham / is not only the father of Judaism / but of Christianity and  
Islam as well.

### **Crises of Faith**

- Now, we can’t expect nor should we desire /  
to scale the heights of faith that Abraham did.
- But, I want to tell you that I really believe that there’s a crisis of faith in the  
Jewish community.

### **Jews Lack Faith: Harris Poll**

- A NY Times poll from a few years ago
- Found that 92% of Muslims / 90% of Protestants /  
and 79% of Roman Catholics said they believed in God
- I was shocked to see that only 52% of Jews /  
said -- they were believers.
- Which means 1/2 of you will hate this sermon!

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/25/key-findings-about-americans-belief-in-god/> -- says that only 33% of Jews are believers

### **Different Surveys**

- You can find different surveys with slightly different results  
but each will be consistent in stating  
that we are less likely to believe in God then our monotheistic counterparts

### **Transition: Reclaim Faith**

- That’s why today on YK / (when we are trying to connect with God)
- I want to talk about how we as Jews / can reclaim our faith in God.

### **Rosenzweig's Story**

- I'll start with the story of Franz Rosenzweig
- Franz Rosenzweig was a famous German philosopher
- He was a secular Jew / and certainly not a man of faith.
- About 100 years ago /
- Rosenzweig was thinking about converting to Christianity.
- B/c he was in Academia, and it was almost impossible to become a professor at a German University if you were Jewish.

### **Visit Synagogue**

- But before he converted
- He decided to visit a small Orthodox synagogue on YK
- To make sure that he was making the right decision
- Rosenzweig said that he heard the Kol Nidrei Melody (someone probably singing like Howard) and it pierced through his soul
- He had an epiphany -- mystical experience – and not only did Rosenzweig / not convert to Christianity
- He became one of the most famous Jewish philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, He opened the Lehrhaus / a school for Modern Torah study in Berlin.

### **We think our journey will be like Rosenzweig's**

- I mention Rosenzweig's story
- B/c many of us who struggle with our faith / (including me)
- Imagine / that our journey will be like Rosenzweig's.
- Some wondrous -- mystical experience / will awaken us to the truth / to God
- Yet this type of epiphany is rare
- It's not how most Jews come to God

### **Slow and Steady Process – Age of 70**

- In fact, the Rabbinic tradition says that Abraham
- Came to God through a slow and steady process,
- Some midrashim say / that it wasn't until Abraham was 70 / that he finally became a believer  
(smashing of the idols is the famous story / also seeing the palace on fire))

### **Transition**

- So, if Abraham / the ultimate man of faith /struggled with his belief in God until the age of 70
- Then who are we to say that we have everything figured out.

## **Rabbi Kushner**

- R' Harold Kushner said that there's very little difference / between the atheist and the believer
- For they both have moments of faith and moments of doubt.
- The only difference is the duration of those moments of faith / and moments of doubt

## **Mother Teresa**

- For example -- a couple of years ago
- A book came out entitled: 'Mother Teresa: Come be My light'
- It contained letters that Mother Teresa had sent to her colleagues.
  
- We certainly think of Mother Teresa,
- As a paragon of sainthood /
- A righteous woman / who devoted her life to the poor of Calcutta.
- That's why it was shocking to read her letters and learn that Mother Teresa was tormented by her doubts about God's existence

## **Letter**

- She wrote this letter to her friend the Reverend Michael Vanderpeet
- 'God has a very special love for you.
- As for me / the silence and the emptiness is so great that I look, and do not see / listen, and do not hear'

## **OK to Struggle**

- Abraham struggled with his belief in God,
- Mother Teresa was tormented by her doubts.
- In our tradition:
- It's ok 'to Doubt God' / 'to Question God' / 'to Struggle with God'

## **Israel means Struggle**

- Remember that the very name of our people is Israel
- Jacob wrestled with the angel and was given the name Israel
- (One who wrestles with God)

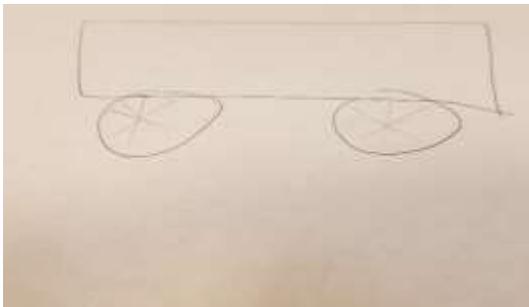
## **Ben Gurion**

- I think it was David Ben Gurion who put it best
- He said: We are not optimists / We are not pessimists, We Jews are struggilists.

- Our very name Israel / teaches us / that the struggle itself is holy
- That the true enemy is indifference (according to Elie Wiesel) /  
Not the spiritual struggle.

### **Why don't we struggle: Micah**

- Why do so many of us fail to grapple with our faith?
- I was thinking about this the other day
- My son Micah loves art just like his mom  
and he asked me to draw him a car for his picture.
- So I drew a rectangle and two circles  
and Micah said: 'dad that's terrible'



### **Why a bad artist?**

- Then / he asked my wife Julie/  
'How come Abba is such a bad artist?'
- And Julie had a great answer
- She said: 'Abba didn't like art as a kid,  
so, he stopped drawing when he was 8 years old,  
That's why he has the skills of an 8-year-old artist'

### **Belief in God**

- I was thinking that this analogy could be applied  
to our belief in God as well.
- Too many Jews stop any type serious Torah study after their Bat mitzvah  
and therefore they have a 13-year old's conception of God.  
And your understanding of God / if you continue to read and study,
- Would certainly be different at age 33 or 53 or 73 / than it is at age 13  
but too many of us abandon the big questions about God /at such a young  
age.

## **Mock Religion**

- And many people who mock religion
- Have such a simplistic, child-like image of God.
- For example: George Carlin in his comedy says --
- ‘You really believe in a little man in the sky / whose taking notes / on who’s been naughty or nice. That’s a Santa Claus God.’

## **Rabbi**

- If you speak to any Rabbi / any serious Jewish thinker /
- You’ll see:
- That their understanding of God is much deeper / and more sophisticated than that.
- That they’d reject the same idea of God that Carlin does,

## **Not One Understanding of God**

- B/c our religion gives us a great deal of theological openness,
- We must believe in something greater,
- However, there’s no one understanding of what God is.

## **All different**

- The Talmud / The Philosophers / The Kabbalists,
- They all teach us something different about God.
- Ibn Ezra -- (don’t have to take every text in the Torah literally)
- Therefore, it’s important /
- That we struggle with our understanding of God /
- As we grow older and have different life experiences.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Reason we struggle**

- Now, another reason
- Many of us don’t struggle with our faith is b/c of our distrust of the unknown
- When my son Sam was younger / he was fussy / and we’d play the game of Peekaboo to calm him down.
- I’d hide behind a blanket and he’d laugh,
- Until / he didn’t laugh anymore.

### **Piaget: Object Permanence**

- The psychologist Piaget explained the trick / with his theory of Object Permanence
- It's a stage, children reach – where they know that just b/c they can't see an object it still exists.

### **Child is Father of the Man**

- As the poet Wordsworth said: 'The child is father of the man'
- Many of us adults have ignored this concept in relationship to God.
- We lack the ability to believe in that which we can't see
- To believe in the reality of God / even though we can't see God.

### **God is hidden**

- It would be easier if I could say / God's at the door for YK -- everyone wave hello to God  
But just b/c God isn't easily accessible / doesn't mean He doesn't exist
- It doesn't mean He's not a part of our world.

### **Egypt: Culture of the Visible**

- We came out of Egypt,
- Egypt was all about buildings and visual splendor.
- Ex: Pyramids -- (visited when I lived in Israel)

### **Jews Reject that**

- We Jews rejected Egyptian culture!
- We said that God and your soul / you can't see them / but they are the essential elements of our world.
- That's where the greatest truth is found – in the unseen – in God.

### **YK: All about**

- And that's what YK is all about (we fast / we spend the day in prayer)
- We're cut off from the physical /
- To focus on the part of us that's not visible = soul /
- To focus on God / who's not visible

### **Yizkor Service**

- The difficulty of the Yizkor Service is that we can't touch/ hug the people we love.  
So, there can be a feeling that they're completely gone

- Yet, if you believe that their souls are being protected by Adonai in heaven.
- That they're not only bound up in the bond of life / but that their essence still exists --their soul = it's very powerful/uplifting
- Of course, Yizkor has great meaning for a variety of reasons, even if you don't believe in the soul
- ((R' Kaplan – 'Can be a Jew by believing, behaving or belonging.'))

### **Summary to this point:**

- I've tried to stress that if you find God like Rosenzweig,
- If you have a mystical experience that's great but the pathway to God for so many of us like Abraham
- Involves a slow and steady process.
- To find God --
- We must learn to embrace the mystery and hiddenness / Of a God – who can never be seen (even to Moses).

### **Radical Amazement**

- There's one other secret to connecting with God that I want to mention this morning.
- Often times / we only feel God's presence in a state of heightened awareness
- With the birth of a child / at a wedding / or on YK.
- Rabbi Heschel calls these times / moments of radical amazement. (moments of that feeling of awesomeness)
- Today / I'm here to tell you / that we must search for God / not just in these magical moments but in the every-day moments.
- That's a lesson I learned / from great Conservative Rabbis R' Kushner's book 'To Life' / R' Wolpe's book 'Why Faith Matters' / R' Kedushin (Rabbis were normal mystics, tried to find God in the everyday)

### **Need to be open to letting God into our lives**

- B/c R' Wolpe says that up until chapter 18 in the Bible,
- God only appears to humanity in momentous times
- Examples: Adam and Eve / Cain / and Noah
- But in chapter 18
- Abraham's sitting outside his tent on a regular hum ho day / and God appears – '*Vayera Elav*'

- We learn an important lesson -- not every manifestation of God / has to be a moment of radical amazement.

### **What does text say about Abraham**

- B/c it doesn't say / Abraham was expecting God (that he had a 12:30 appointment)
- It just says that Abraham was sitting there and he found God  
We learn -- that we can find God in unexpected moments
- That you can connect with God / at any time in any place (if you are aware= refer to my RH sermon).

### **Cynicism about God in everyday moments**

- Unfortunately, we struggle to sense God's presence in our everyday lives.
- If someone says: I felt God's presence /  
'The first time / I held my newborn child'  
'Or I went hiking / in the Galilee / and I saw a beautiful sunset  
while I was on top of a mountain' // we can relate

### **Wawa**

- But if someone says: 'I was on my lunch break / eating a tuna sandwich at Wawa / and I felt God's presence'
- 'or I was driving on Ritchie Highway / and I got stuck in traffic / by the new Dunkin Donuts / and I felt God's presence'
- - We'd say really!?

### **God is Everywhere**

- However, Judaism believes that God is everywhere at all times (not just in the awesome / radical amazement moments)
- Like Abraham we can find Adonai in the everyday if we turn our hearts towards Hashem.

### **Transition to John McCain**

- I began this sermon with a story about my Grandma Lil /
- How her faith helped her survive Auschwitz.
- And I'd like to conclude by mentioning another person / who was saved by faith.
- The great Senator John McCain

### **John McCain's burial**

- Two weeks ago, / Senator John McCain
- Was buried at the Naval Academy in Annapolis
- As most of us know / John McCain was a war hero
- He was a Navy pilot who served in Vietnam

### **Plane shot down**

- In 1967 / on his 24<sup>th</sup> mission / his plane was shot down over Hanoi.
- In the crash / he fractured both arms and his right leg /
- The Vietnamese soldiers that found McCain took him to a prison camp
- Where they refused to treat him for his injuries and frequently beat him.

### **Worst Part**

- Senator McCain said that the worst part of his 5 ½ years as a POW /
- Was the 2 years he spent in solitary confinement.
- He was afraid --
- He said: that the loneliness of that experience was so great
- That it almost crushed his spirit  
so, how'd he survive?
- Although he never flaunted his religiosity
- John McCain was a man of faith

### **Prayed more often**

- He said: that he prayed more often and more fervently  
than he ever had as a free-man
- That he'd frequently recite biblical passages /  
when he felt himself getting weak

### **Faith gave him courage**

- Senator McCain believed that his faith in God gave him the courage to keep  
going
- That he could deal with the pain / the lack of food -- and water / but without  
God / he wouldn't have survived that dark period of his life /
- He wouldn't have become one of our country's great leaders.

### **Greater Understanding**

- John McCain understood
- That we can live w/o food and water (for a time) / we fast on YK
- We know that we can live w/o TV and internet and the morning newspaper.  
but we can't live properly -- w/o faith // w/o hope.

## Conclusion

- On this holy day of YK /
- Where we try and connect with the divine / and get in touch with our soul (our essence)
- I urge us to embrace our faith.
- To know that like Abraham / it will likely be a slow and steady process filled with moments of faith and moments of doubt
- But we must yearn for God /  
In both the holy and the mundane moments in our lives.
- B/c God can be found in every corner of this world  
and as my Grandma Lil and Senator McCain realized / faith has the power to save us all.

## Postscript

- Let us now begin the Yizkor service on pg. 290
- (or you can use the wonderful booklets created by Seymour Alloy)
- **As we ask God to remember and protect / the souls of our loved ones in heaven**