

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Erev Rosh Hashana 5769

BARUCH DAYAN HA'EMET

When I was growing up my Rabbi told a story about a little boy who announced to his parents that he didn't believe in God. His parents were taken aback. "Why?" they asked.

He said to them: "I really want a new bicycle, so every night for the last two weeks I prayed to God to give me a new bicycle. Every morning I came down stairs and looked for my new bicycle, but all I found is my old one. There must not be a God up there because He didn't answer my prayers."

His parents looked at him and asked, "How can you be so sure that God didn't *hear* your prayers?"

"Because I still have my same old bike," said the boy.

"Well," said his parents, "that doesn't prove anything. Maybe God did hear your prayers and gave you the answer you didn't want to hear. Maybe God said: 'no!'"

This story reflects the perception of God as the being the great "Cosmic Bell Hop," the Heavenly Servant who is supposed to answer our prayers and be at our beck and call. If we get what we want, we believe. If we don't get what we want we turn our backs on faith.

Belief in a hearing, seeing, all-knowing, judging, and answering God is a central tenet of these High Holy Days. One of the Rabbinic names for Rosh Hashana, one which reflects this belief, is *Yom HaDin*, the Day of Judgement. The Rabbis of the Talmud taught that on Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and the days in between, God

reviews our earthly record and decides who shall live and who shall die in the year to come. On these holy days we devote ourselves to prayer and acts of contrition in the hope that God will hear us and grant us life in the year to come.

A few weeks ago, during *Kabbalat Shabbat* services, I told the congregation about a Christian funeral I had attended that afternoon. The Episcopal Priest who conducted the service began with a reading from the Episcopal liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer:

“In the midst of life we are in death;
from whom can we seek help?
From you alone, O Lord,
who by our sins are justly angered.”

I told the congregation that these verses, when spoken at a funeral, seem to reflect the belief that death is God’s punishment for sin. The continuation of the service appears to confirm this, as God is acknowledged as the Judge of all Creation:

“O worthy and eternal Judge,
do not let the pains of death
turn us away from you at our last hour.”

I asked the congregation whether they thought such words and sentiments - that God is Judge and death a punishment - would be appropriate at a Jewish funeral. Almost everyone said: “No. Jews don’t believe that.”

You can only imagine their surprise, which may be mirrored by your own, when I told them that not only would similar words and thoughts be appropriate at a Jewish funeral, they are in fact recited several times during the service.

The first time is when the mourners, or for that matter anyone else, hears the news that someone has died. The traditional response when learning of death is not, “I am so sorry to hear it,” but rather “*Baruch Dayan Ha-Emet*. Praised be the True Judge or Judge of Truth.”

The second time is when mourners rip their clothing prior to the funeral. They expand on the same theme with the blessing, “Praised are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, the True Judge.

Finally, before the casket is lowered into the ground, a prayer called “Tziduk Ha-Din” is recited which among other things affirms:

דין אמת, שופט צדק ואמת, ברוך דין האמת

“We know, Adonai, that Your judgement is righteous.

You are righteous in Your word and pure in Your judgement.

Just are You and upright are Your judgments, Judge of Truth and Righteousness.

Praised is the Judge of Truth, all of whose judgments are just and true.”

This prayer explicitly acknowledges God as Supreme Judge, and implies, or perhaps even makes explicit, that life and death reflect Divine judgement.

At the Episcopal funeral service I attended when the priest recited the lines:

“In the midst of life we are in death;

from whom can we seek help?

From you alone, O Lord,

who by our sins are justly angered,”

I sensed some discomfort on his part. He he recited them rather hurriedly and moved on with the service.

To be fair I called another Episcopal Priest to make sure I understood the prayer correctly. He told me he did not understand it to mean that death was the result of God's judgement, but when I pressed him on it he demurred and told me he had just returned from vacation and his head was still somewhere else and he was not quite ready to discuss theology.

I identified with his theological discomfort. I often struggle reciting *Tziduk HaDin* and helping mourners say: "*Baruch Dayan HaEmet*, Praised be the Judge of Truth." Much of the pain and suffering I witness is unearned and undeserved. I see lots of good people wounded by life. But I am reluctant to attribute pain and suffering, death and illness, to the unknowable but righteous acts of a Supreme Being whose essence I believe to be love and compassion. To some degree I do believe that the "Lord works in mysterious ways," but on the other hand I refuse to see the hand of God in natural disasters, illness, or the hateful acts of human beings.

I explicitly refute the theology expressed by the late Jerry Falwell who reportedly said: "AIDS is the wrath of a just God against homosexuals. To oppose it would be like an Israelite jumping in the Red Sea to save one of Pharaoh's charioteers... AIDS is not just God's punishment for homosexuals; it is God's punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals." (circa 1991)

AIDS is a terrible disease, but like any other disease, it carries no moral valence. If we say AIDS is a punishment from God for some moral infraction, then we must also look for the moral underpinnings of cancer, heart disease, and the common cold, for that matter. Disease is a biological process that is a result of many different influences and variables including genetics and environment. However, whether or not one is a good

person has no effect on the prevention, treatment, or progress of disease.

Just as I reject the idea of a punishing God, so do I reject the supposition that we can “manage” God or have an expectation that God will do our bidding. I recently spoke with a member of the congregation who told me that one of his relatives was ill. I asked him if he wanted me to add that person to our *Mishebeirach* list, the list of people for whom we pray for a *refuah shleimah*, a speedy and complete healing, each morning at *minyan* and *Shabbat* services. The congregant demurred. He told me that he felt ambivalent about such prayers. He doubted that God interferes in the natural process of disease and healing and, if so, of what value is a prayer requesting such intervention?

“Furthermore,” my friend asked, “Does a sick person’s recovery or decline depend upon pleasing God? If my loved one improves am I to conclude that it was because he was worthy of good health or that we had made a good prayer, but if he got worse it was because he had done something wrong or our prayer was no good? That just doesn’t make sense,” said the congregant. “That’s not how the world I live in works.”

Similarly, I have never understood sports teams that huddle before a game to utter a prayer instead of discussing strategy. If the huddling team wins the game does that mean that God likes that team better than the other? If they lose is it because God favors their opponents? I just cannot believe that God likes the Dodgers better than the Padres?...though I may have to give you that one.

Tifereth Israel’s Sisterhood and Men’s Club have invited me to give my annual book review at their meeting on March 19th. I am going to be reviewing “Constantine’s Sword, the Church and the Jews” by James Carroll. Those of you who are intimidated by its 616 pages of text and 125 pages of footnotes, bibliography, and index might want

to consider watching the DVD that is based on the book instead.

Near the beginning of *Constantine's Sword*, Carroll quotes the late Reverend William Sloan Coffin, former chaplain of Yale University and Senior Minister of the Riverside Church in New York City, as he was eulogizing his son Alex, who was tragically killed in an automobile accident:

“When a person dies there are many things that can be said, and there is at least one thing that should never be said... The night after Alex died, a kind woman came into the house carrying about 18 quiches, saying sadly, ‘I just don't understand the will of God.’

“I exploded. ‘I'll say you don't, lady. Do you think it was the will of God that Alex never fixed that lousy windshield wiper, that he was probably driving too fast in such a storm, that he probably had a couple of beers too many? Do you think it is God's will that there are no streetlights on that road and no guardrail separating that right-angle turn from Boston Harbor?’

“For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his finger on triggers, his fist on knives, his hand on steering wheels. Deaths that are untimely and slow and pain-ridden raise unanswerable questions... Never do we know enough to say that a death was the will of God... My own consolation lies in knowing that it not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was first of all our hearts to break.”

The Reverend Sloan Coffin's statement of faith mirrors that of Rabbi Harold Kushner, whose son, Aaron, died of progeria, the rapid aging disease, two days after his

fourteenth birthday.

“How does God make a difference in our life if He neither kills nor cures?” asks Rabbi Kushner in “Why Bad Things Happen to Good People.” His answer: “God inspires people to help other people who have been hurt by life, and by helping them, they protect them from the danger of feeling alone, abandoned, or judged.” (P. 139)

“God may not prevent the calamity, but He gives us the strength and the perseverance to overcome it..The heart attack which slows down a forty-six year old businessman does not come from God, but the determination to change his life style, to stop smoking, to care less about expanding his business and care more about spending time with his family, because his eyes have been opened to what is truly important to him—those things come from God.” (P. 141)

Rabbi Kushner’s and the Reverend Sloan Coffin’s thoughts on God speak to me. They help me make sense of a world that is often chaotic, unreasonable, and unfair. I do not believe that God interferes in the workings of the physical world. God is not the “Cosmic Bellhop” who grants our requests for our financial portfolios to grow or to smite our enemies with disease and misfortune. But God is here to comfort and guide us in times of sorrow and trouble. God is here when others respond to our needs and we respond to the needs of others. God is found in the courage that is required to move forward in life despite the obstacles, stumbling blocks, pains, aches, and hardships that block our way. God is found wherever human beings do good.

There are many who disagree with this concept of God, one which suggests that God is either powerless to interfere in the natural world or chooses not to. They instead affirm an active and responsive God. One critique of Rabbi’s Kushner’s theology was

written by Rabbi Yitzchok Kirzner writing on behalf of *Aish HaTorah*, an ultra-Orthodox Jewish organization.

Rabbi Kirzner explains human suffering in the following way: “If someone does something wrong, and subsequently something bad happens to him or her, the natural tendency is to chalk up the latter event as some form of punishment from God -- the just desserts of his action, as it were.

“Yet there is no such concept in the Torah of God meting out punishment in this world. God never simply inflicts pain as punishment, for such punishment has nothing to do with His purpose in creating the world. His purpose was to give. What we term ‘deserved suffering’ from our perspective is not designed to punish, but rather to make it possible for God to give to the person thus afflicted, either by purging him of impurities caused by his sins or by directing him back to the correct path. What we perceive as ‘punishments’ are pathways to enable man to come closer to God”

In other words, Rabbi Kirzner claims that in the Torah one never finds God punishing for wrong doing in *this world*, as opposed the *next*, and that what human beings experience as pain and suffering are, in reality, benefits that God grants them in God’s attempt to purge them from sin and to direct them back on the correct path. Rabbi Kirzner claims that what we think is bad is in reality good, because it helps us come closer to God.

I disagree with his assertions. First of all, the Torah clearly states time after time that God punishes Israel for her sins. One example of such punishments is found in the selection we read twice a day from the book of *Devarim*, Deuteronomy, in the second paragraph of the *Shema*:

הַשְׁמַרְוּ לָכֶם פְּרִי-יְפֹתָהּ לְבַבְכֶם וְסִרְתֶּם וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם:

יִזְוָתָהּ אֶף-ק' בְּכֶם

“Take care lest you be tempted to stray, and to worship false gods. For then Adonai’s wrath will be directed against you, God will close the heavens and hold back the rain; the earth will not yield its produce. You will soon disappear from the good land which Adonai is giving you.” (Deut. 11:16) God tells the Israelites if they do not obey they will feel the Divine Wrath, that is, God will punish them.

Secondly, and more importantly, Rabbi Kirzner’s explanation of suffering as purifying leaves me mystified, perplexed, and empty. He is restating the argument of Job’s three friends: if you are suffering and in pain, it must be because you are doing something wrong, even if you don’t recognize what you did wrong. Your suffering is God’s way of encouraging you to examine your soul and root out sin from your life. If God is hurting you it must be for your benefit! You need to discover where you failed.

Sorry, I just don’t find this argument reasonable or helpful. I find it hurtful and guilt inducing. Should we explain the death of an infant to its parents in the following way: Your baby died because God was trying to show you how sinful you are and he wanted you to repent? If you were better people your child would have lived! And what of the baby itself? What was she supposed to learn from her failure to draw breath?

Or what shall we say to the husband or wife mourning a spouse? Your loss is God’s way of purifying your soul? God wanted to teach you a lesson so that you will live a better and happier life, so he removed your greatest love from your life? And what about the victims of a hurricane, or of the Nazis death marches and concentration

camps? Were all of these horrors meant to teach us a lesson? And if so, exactly what is it that we are supposed to learn? And even if all of this suffering was for the purpose of “purging me of my impurities” why should these innocents have to pay the price for my sins?

Although I understand the theological problems caused by declaring that God has limited power or that God chooses not to interfere in the physical world, I prefer this option over believing in a God who makes people suffer for their own benefit without making it clear what they are doing wrong, how to fix it, or what the benefit is. I much prefer to accept the basic unfairness we find in the world, of the good suffering and the wicked prospering, rather than believing in a God who plays games with my mind and my life.

I believe in a God who, although not interfering with my free will and the natural world order, is with me and supports me during troubled times, inspires me to keep on living, and encourages me and others to heal the world and its inhabitants.

And yet, despite my belief in a God who neither judges nor interferes, tomorrow, during the *Musaf* service, I will join everyone else here in prayer:

האוחז ביד מדת משפט וכל מאמינים שהוא אל אמונה.

“He holds the scales of judgement in His hand;

We believe He is a faithful God.

He alone is the judge of all who come into the world;

We believe He is the true Judge.”

Even though I believe in a God who supports but does not interfere, much of the

Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur liturgy is about a God who judges, rewards, and punishes, causes death and gives life. How can these two concepts of God which are almost directly opposite one another be harmonized? What sense can I make of the traditional language and imagery that are used today? What does my prayer mean today, or any day, if God can't or won't give me what I want? Wow! Do I have a theological headache!

For my answers to these and other questions of spirit and faith, you will have to come back tomorrow!

Tonight I have raised many difficult and complicated theological issues. I have raised many complex and complicated questions to which there are many equally complex and complicated answers. My own approach is by no means shared by everyone nor is it in anyway authoritative. One of the many things I love about Judaism is the latitude that each of us is given to ask our own questions and give our own answers about what we believe.

Tonight, as you sit around your holiday dinner table or after you have enjoyed your meal I am going to ask to talk about some of the concepts and contradictions I raised tonight and talk about your own personal belief system. What role, if any, does God play in your life, and how does God respond or interact with you? What is the function of your prayer and what is it supposed to do and for whom? When you chant in the service "Avinu Malkeinu, Chaneinu v'Aneinu, Ki Ein Banu Ma'asim," Our Father our King or Our Parent Our Ruler, graciously answer us, although we are without merits. Deal with us charitably and lovingly save us" how do you know that your prayers are heard and exactly what is it you are asking of God?

Rabbis are often accused of not doing enough “God talk” in their sermons and discussions with their congregation. It’s not that we don’t think about God but we often find ourselves as unsure and perplexed as everyone else.

I have been thinking about God and the “mystery of God’s ways” during the last few weeks. I invite all of you tonight to join me in this spiritual journey by reflecting on your own beliefs about God and the role those beliefs and God play in guiding your life.

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Rosh Hashana Day 5769

STRUGGLING WITH GOD

A few weeks ago I met with my new tenth grade Hebrew High class for the first time this year. As is my custom, the first topic was “God.” I encouraged the students to share their thoughts about God and the role God plays, or does not play, in their lives. It took a bit of prodding, but once they got started, my students didn’t move until after the bell.

This year one of my students is a bright young woman who has not had much formal Jewish education. As the other students began to share their beliefs, I noticed that this young woman was sitting quietly and not participating. When there was a break in the conversation I asked her if she felt comfortable sharing her thoughts.

She cautiously said: “I haven’t had a lot of Jewish education, so my ideas may not fit in.

“I am not sure that I believe that there is a God up there who controls the world and causes things to happen on earth. Science seems to speak against it, and the world seems out of control rather than under the control of some great intelligence.”

Many of the other students looked surprised. Slowly, many of them began to agree with her. They, too, doubted the existence of God. They did not know if their prayers were heard or if there is a Divine Judge and Judgement. Other students added that although they did believe in a hearing, answering, loving, and caring God, but they, they also have questions and doubts.

I told them that they were in good company. Many people question the workings

and very existence of a Divine Life Giver who cares about the world and its inhabitants. These questions and doubts seem particularly prevalent among Jews. The most common answer I receive when I ask Jews if they believe in a God who is aware of their problems, listens to their prayers, and answers them is: “I don’t know.” This is not surprising nor distressing because Judaism does not require us to have blind and unquestioning faith. The opposite is true. Struggling with God is a sacred Jewish vocation.

The Torah contains the following story about our patriarch, Jacob. One night, after Jacob fell asleep, a Divine Being confronted him and struggled with him. Jacob got the upper hand and as the sun rose the Divine Being begged to be released. Jacob demanded a blessing in return. The Divine Being said:

וַיֹּאמֶר לֹא יַעֲקֹב יִאָמַר עוֹד שְׁמִי בִּי אִם-יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי-שָׁרִיתָ עִם-אֱלֹהִים וְעִם-אֲנָשִׁים וַתִּזְכָּק:

“Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” (Gen. 32:39)

Jacob’s name was changed to Israel as a result of that struggle. Israel means: “the one who struggles with God.” Struggling with God is part of our spiritual inheritance. This is what Jews do daily. Jews struggle with God, or more precisely, with our conception of God, since Jews believe that God is ultimately unknowable.

One of my Hebrew High students brought the Jewish belief about the unknowability of God into sharp focus when I asked him and his classmates to respond to a “Faith Inventory” I handed out. One of the questions was: “Do you think God is aware of us?” His answer was “no.” He explained that Judaism teaches that God is absolutely unknowable and completely “Other.” God cannot be defined or described.

Therefore, we cannot say that God is “aware” of us because “awareness” is a human attribute. Once you describe God as having human characteristics, such as “awareness” or “knowledge” then you are not describing God because God is indescribable.

It was quite a sophisticated answer for a fifteen year old. I told this young man that his thoughts reflected those of Moses Maimonides, the great philosopher, physician, and rabbi of the 12th century, who wrote in his *Moreh Nevuchim*, Guide to the Perplexed, that we can never describe God in positive terms, because to do so would be to limit God. The best we can do is describe God in negative terms. That is, we cannot say what God is, only what God is not. For example, we cannot say that God is “good,” because that means God would have to act (another human characteristic, by the way) in accordance with our definition and understanding of “goodness.” This would limit God. But we can say that God is “not evil” because it means that God is outside of human definition.

Therefore, we can never truly know “God” or understand how God operates in the world or in our lives. The struggle to know God is an unending one. All we can ever hope to discover are our own beliefs about God now, at this very minute, because in the next we may change our mind. Although God doesn’t change, how we think about God does.

O.K. Let’s take a deep breath. If you are still with me, I think that you will agree with me that there are as many ways of understanding God as there are people who profess to believe, or not believe, in Him...or Her.

When I was a rabbinical student in New York I taught at the Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the first Reconstructionist synagogue. I will always remember

something the rabbi, Rabbi Alan Miller, said during a sermon about faith and belief. He admonished the congregation, “Don’t tell me you don’t believe in God, because the God you don’t believe in is not the same God as the God I don’t believe in!”

It was good for a laugh, but behind his humor was a serious observation. Since there are many different conceptions of who or what God is, whether or not one *believes* in God depends upon what you believe God is or is not. Often the God people do not believe in is the same God I do not believe in, i.e., the Big Guy with the Long White Beard Sitting on a Throne in heaven. Perhaps with a little more reflection and exploration more Jews could discover their own way to believe.

I also believe that it is impossible for human beings to be completely consistent in their beliefs about God, and that far from being an impediment to faith, it can be a testament to faith. A couple of weeks ago I had a discussion with a group of senior citizens, or mature adults, if you prefer, that was similar to the one I had with my Hebrew High students. To encourage their participation I told them I needed their help in writing a High Holy Day sermon.

One woman said: “I believe that God is a Force in the universe that fills every person and every living creature. I don’t believe that God is some kind of “being” that can be located in time or space or described in any way. And yet, I also believe in a personal God, One that I pray to, who answers me, and who heals the ill, uplifts the downcast, and blesses all of us with courage, strength, love, and hope.”

She paused and then continued: “I know that what I just said is completely contradictory. On one hand, I believe that God is energy, a force in the universe without identifiable form or substance, and on the other hand, I believe that God is a Being with

whom I can have a personal “I-Thou” relationship. I know it doesn’t make sense, but that’s what I believe.”

I found myself nodding in agreement. I often feel the same dissonance. For example, I don’t believe in a God who responds directly to prayer, yet I do believe in the power of prayer. I do believe that prayers have some effect not only on those who utter them and hear them, but on those for whom we pray, even though I do not believe that prayer changes the natural course of events. Please don’t ask me to explain how I can rationally embrace these two opposite beliefs. I can’t. But that is why I say “I believe,” rather than I can prove. Personal religious faith often embraces contradictions.

Last night I shared some of my personal theological musings with the congregation. (Those of you who were not here can read them on the Tifereth Israel website—after the holidays.) I said that I do not believe in a God who interferes in the natural order, or rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. I don’t see the hand of God manipulating the world around us. My own belief system is closer to that of Rabbi Harold Kushner, author of “When Bad Things Happen to Good People,” who wrote that if he has to choose between a God that is all good and a God that is all powerful, he will opt for believing in a good and loving God rather than a God who allows babies to die and innocents to suffer.

I also said last night, that given my beliefs in a “hands-off” God, the traditional liturgy we recite today seems to contradict the way I see the world. How can I sit in the synagogue today and plead for God to write me in the *Sefer Chaim*, the Book of Life, if I don’t literally believe that God sits with two books in heaven and decrees everyone’s fate? How can I ask for God to “remember us with blessing, with deliverance, and

mercy?” if I do not think of God as possessing human memory? How can I declare “He is just, and to Him the great and small are alike; we believe He is the righteous Judge?” if I don’t believe God judges, rewards, and punishes?

This is where I become Israel, the one who struggles with God. This is where we are all “Israel.” How can any of us find meaning in the traditional liturgy if it does not seem to reflect our own personal beliefs?

Through my years of struggle I have learned that I cannot find meaning in the service and prayers if I allow them to be an exercise in the rote recitation of Hebrew or English words. I have to immerse myself in the language. I have to think, meditate, and reflect. I have to struggle. Above all, I have to apply the same tools used by Jews throughout the centuries to bring our ancient traditions to life. I need to interpret them. I need to understand these texts metaphorically and symbolically. I need to create my own *midrash*.

Midrash, interpreting and re-interpreting Jewish texts is not an innovation. It is integral to our tradition. The rabbis of the Talmud always drew a distinction between *pshat*, the literal meaning of text, and *drash*, the interpretive tradition, and explored each in their search for God and meaning in their lives. They understood that the text could only come to life if it was anchored in its source and then grown into something new.

The *Mahzor* we use today reflects this interpretive tradition, not only in its English translation and supplemental readings, but in its Hebrew as well. The prayer book we hold in our hands contains layers upon layers of Jewish tradition that have been added on over the course of many centuries, along with layers and layers of understanding about what all these layers mean. All of us here today need to add our own layer upon

those which have been gifted to us.

For the next few minutes I want to share with you an example of how I approach the traditional liturgy and make it speak to me.

One of the highlights of today's prayer service is *Unetaneh Tokef*, the prayer which describes the scene in heaven on Judgement Day. I often refer to it during the High Holy Days because it so beautifully, poetically, and clearly articulates one of the great and overarching themes of the day: the power of *teshuva*, repentance.

Please open your *mahzorim* with me to page 283.

1. First, please note the heading that is provided for this prayer by the editor of our *Mahzor*: "The Day of Judgement as envisioned by our ancestors." We can already see that we are not about to read a literal account of what God does, but rather how our ancestors *imagined* the High Holy Days playing out in heaven. *Unetaneh Tokef* is one poet's vision. Perhaps, even its author understood *Unetaneh Tokef* not literally, but as a poetic metaphor.

2. Second, the introductory paragraph begins:

ונתנה תוקף קדשת היום. כי הוא נורא ואיום.

"We proclaim the great sanctity of this day, a day filled with awe and trembling." We immediately see who and what these prayers and holidays are about. They are not about God, they are about **us**. Even though Rosh Hashana is ordained by the Torah, it becomes like every other day unless **we, the community**, make it holy. It is we who endow Rosh Hashana with meaning and make it sacred. If we use this day to reflect on our lives and change our ways, then it will benefit us and renew our spirits. If we make this day like every other, or simply attend services without concentrating and reflecting

on their meaning, then we might as well go to work, or school, or shop, which, by the way, many Jews choose to do.

3. Please turn your attention to the second paragraph on the page.

ותפתח את ספר הזכרונות

“You open the Book of Remembrance, and the record speaks for itself, for each of us has signed it with deeds.” This line alludes to the heavenly “Books of Life and Death” which, according to Talmudic lore, are opened on Rosh Hashana and sealed on Yom Kippur. However, the author of *Unetaneh Tokef* is not speaking of these books, but rather of God opening the *Sefer Zichronot*, the Book of Remembrance, the book of our past deeds, the book of our personal and communal history. This is not a book in which God inscribes our fates, but a book in which we have inscribed our own fates by virtue of our own deeds. Indeed, וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ – each of us has signed it with our deeds.

The poet is reminding us that no deed we perform, either good or bad, is forgotten. Each word and action has long and far reaching effect. All of our deeds are recorded in the lives and memories of those around us and in our own memory and conscience. Once we perform an unkind deed or utter a mean word, it is there forever. It is never forgotten. Even if we apologize or try to rectify the situation, we may ameliorate the pain we have caused, but we can never completely erase the hurt. As the prayer says, our actions speak for themselves and take on a life of their own. Therefore, it behooves all of us to carefully consider everything we say and do.

4. Next the author of *Unetaneh Tokef* paints an image of our passing before God

as a flock of sheep as God reviews our lives. This is a beautiful mixed metaphor which reflects the concept of justice on one hand and the concept of mercy on the other.

There is a well known *midrash*, a Rabbinic interpretation, that explains that when God created the world God could not decide whether to establish it on justice or mercy. If the world was based solely on justice, humanity could not survive. For example, a drug addict stealing a jewel to feed his habit and a poor man stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family are both thieves. The poor man is just as guilty as the addict. Justice demands that each should be punished without respect to the underlying circumstance. But this just does not seem right.

On the other hand, if the world was based completely on mercy, civilization would break down. In respect to our thieves, it would be an act of kindness not to punish the poor man stealing to feed his family too harshly. But wouldn't kindness also dictate that we have compassion for the addict as well? Surely, there are underlying circumstances that led to his crime! Shouldn't we deal mercifully with him as well? Shouldn't we listen to his promise to reform and let him go? We can imagine the chaos that would exist if everyone was dealt only with mercy and justice did not exist.

"So what did God do?" asks the Midrash. God created the world with justice and mercy, with a combination of the two, with a tension between the two, leaving it up to us to decide in any given situation which should have a stronger say.

The image of God as shepherd today reflects this tension. One on hand justice would require that we be punished for our sins and wrong doings. But a shepherd, first and foremost, does not punish his flock. A shepherd cares for and guides his flock. A shepherd acts with compassion and love. The poet pictures God as judging us, but

judging us with love and compassion.

When we think about our own lives and the lives of those around us, how do we relate to the wrongs we encounter, with justice? with mercy? or a combination of the two? If we judge too harshly, we cause pain and upset, if we excuse everything, we encourage bad behavior. Every time we interact with someone, we need to weigh being careful, thoughtful, fair, and compassionate. This is yet another truth of which the *Unetaneh Tokef* reminds us.

Finally, we come to the image of God writing down in the heavenly books, מִי יחיה ומי ימות - who shall live and who shall die. When we examine the prayer carefully we see that the poet is not arguing for predestination, that at the beginning of the year everything is decided and no matter what we do we cannot change our destiny.

He argues the opposite:

ותשובה ותפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה.

“But repentance, prayer, and deeds of kindness can remove the severity of the decree.” Our lives are not preordained, says the poet. We are not fated to follow some pre-chosen and pre-foreseen path. We can change and alter our lives. The *Unetaneh Tokef's* author even provides instructions to guide us. We can change ourselves and change the world through self assessment, personal growth, prayer, meditation, reflection, helping others in need, and contributing to worthy causes. If we engage in these acts, the poet tells us, tomorrow will not only be different, but better, than today.

However, the author of *Unetaneh Tokef* does not promise that engaging in these positive acts will shield us from life's setbacks, troubles, and tragedies. But, מעבירין את

רוע הגזרה - repentance, prayer, and doing positive and beneficial acts will alleviate some of pain we experience when life gets us down. Self reflection, prayer, and performing *mitzvot* will help us lift our spirits, especially during life's darkest days.

I once had a roommate who never did anything Jewish during the year, but on Yom Kippur he sat in the synagogue the entire day. He never took a break, but he also never opened his *Mahzor* or his mouth. He sat all day in *shul* as if it were some kind of punishment that would atone for all of his failures and sins.

I guess that is one way to look at the High Holy Days, and all of Judaism for that matter—as something to be suffered through for some vague undefined reason or because of nostalgic longing or a guilty conscience. I know that this is how some people approach the holidays, but it doesn't work for me. If I do not leave here a different person than I was when I entered, celebrating the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, becomes no more for me than an exercise in treading spiritual water.

Last night I said I have been thinking about God and the “mystery of God's ways” during the several months and invited the congregation to join in the spiritual journey by reflecting on their own beliefs about God and the role those beliefs play in guiding their lives.

This morning I extend the same invitation and expand upon it. In addition to exploring your own beliefs about God, and good and evil, reward and punishment, and your role in the world and the universe, I also invite you to explore the *Mahzor* in your hands as well as the innumerable texts of our Jewish heritage. You should not only read them, you should explore them and seek out the messages within in that apply to your

own life. You should feel free to create your interpretation, your own *midrash*, so that when you come to *Shabbat* and holiday services you feel that you have gained through the experience and leave feeling that you have grown as a Jew and human being.

The sage Ben Bag Bag said about the Torah: **פְּתַח בַּת וְהִפְךָ בָּהּ, וְכִלְיָא בָּהּ.** Turn it over, turn it over, you will find everything inside. With a little just a little bit of effort I promise that you will be able to bring to light the hidden treasures that Judaism contains.

Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Kol Nidrei Eve 5769

A SEASON OF CHANGE

There has been a lot of talk this election year about “change.” Each of the presidential candidates has been vying with the other as to who will be the better agent of change.

In his speech accepting the Republican Party’s nomination as its candidate for President of the United States, Senator John McCain said:

“In America, we *change* things that need to be changed. Each generation makes its contribution to our greatness...We need to *change* the way government does almost everything... We have to catch up to history, and we have to *change* the way we do business in Washington.”

Two weeks prior, Senator Barack Obama accepted the Democratic Party’s nomination with the following words: “...one of the things that we have to *change* in our politics is the idea that people cannot disagree without challenging each other's character and patriotism...You have shown what history teaches us -- that at defining moments like this one, the *change* we need doesn't come from Washington. *Change* comes to Washington. *Change* happens because the American people demand it -- because they rise up and insist on new ideas and new leadership, a new politics for a new time.”

Each of the candidates portrays himself as the one most able to shake up Washington and make things different. Each of these candidates promises to make his peers and subordinates do business in a different way. And yet, as different as their

visions are of what “change” constitutes, Barak Obama and John McCain share one thing in common; both of these men see the word “change” as a transitive verb, something that they will make somebody or something else do. Each claims to have the intelligence, skill, fortitude, and ability to alter the ways in which others see the world or do business. Each promises to challenge the status quo and make others conform to his vision of what is best and right for America. They will *change* Washington, they will *change* congress, they will *change* the bureaucracy, they will *change* the partisan politics handcuffing the legislative process and alienating the American people.

Although these slogans and promises play well on the political scene, I wonder if they are realistic or even reasonable. My own experience is that trying to change someone else by forcing them to do what I want them to do, or be whom I want them to be, is a project doomed to failure.

Before Judy and I left for New York for me to attend Rabbinical School at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, we spent the summer working at Camp Ramah in Ojai. The director of the camp was a well respected and revered Jewish educator. He and his young family lived in the same adult housing building as did Judy and I.

One afternoon, as we were sitting in the downstairs common living room, the director’s four year old daughter began climbing the stairs. He saw her and said: “Rebecca, please come back down the stairs.” Rebecca did not move. She looked at her father, defiance in her eyes, and said: “No!” All of the teenagers and young adults in the living room stopped talking.

“Rebecca,” said the director, “I told you to come down the stairs. I mean it. Come

down now!”

“No!,” screamed Rebecca.

We froze. We waited with baited breath. You could have heard a pin drop.

“Rebecca,” said the director. “This is the very last time I am going to tell you to come down the stairs!”

I don’t even need to tell you how Rebecca responded. “I said no!”

Rebecca had called her father’s threat. The director’s four year old daughter had not only challenged his authority, but worse, she had done so in front of his staff, all of whom were expected to respond to his every demand before it was uttered.

The director was a role model for us. We often modeled his behavior. We all faced off with campers who did not do what we wanted them to do. We wondered how he would handle this challenge to his authority, and what we would learn from him.

This renowned Jewish educator looked up at his daughter and said: “This is the last time I am going to tell you. Come down the stairs NOW!”

“No! No! No!” screamed Rebecca. We looked on expectantly.

Our mentor looked up at his daughter standing defiantly on the stairs, shook his head and said: “Aw, to hell with it!” and walked out of the room.

Let us consider. If an experienced Jewish parent and educator could not make his four year old daughter come down the stairs, how does any politician hope to control all of the Senators, Representatives, aides, bureaucrats, and lobbyists who comprise the Washington establishment? They all have their own constituents to serve, vested interests to protect, turf to defend. Unless one lives in Communist China or under some other totalitarian regime, it is simply impossible to make other human beings conform to

your will and do what you want them to do.

I once heard a school counselor speaking with a group of young adults about their relationships with their parents. The kids were all complaining, as kids typically do, about their parents' behavior. They did not like the way their parents bossed them around and their relationships with them. No matter how much they tried to reason with their parents, or convince and cajole them, or threaten and yell at them, their parents never changed. The teens could not get their parents to treat them differently or trust and respect them. No matter how much they tried to make things different and better, their parents remained the same.

The counselor asked: how long have you been trying to change your parents' behavior? All of them answered: "For as long as we can remember."

The counselor looked around the room. He said: "Since all of you are between 16 and 18 years old, that means you have been trying for about that long, right?" "Right," answered the students.

The counselor continued: "It seems to me that if you have tried to change your parents for all those years and haven't been successful up to now, you probably never will be. Your parents are much older than you and pretty set in their ways. If you continue to struggle to make them see things your way you are always going to have a rocky relationship with them. If you want to make things better you are going to have to do the work. You are going to have to do what is necessary to earn their trust and respect. Above all, you will need to find a way to accept them the way they are and make peace with them. You will need to give up trying to change them because in the end, the only person that any of us is ever be able to change is ourselves."

I do not want to suggest or imply, as some do, that all of the problems and challenges we face in life are of our own making and that no one else bears responsibility for at least some of our miseries. However, it seems clear that when it comes to change, while we can moderate our own actions, we have almost no control over anyone else. Therefore, when we are faced with problems and roadblocks not of our own making we can become irritated and angry and lash out, or we can figure out how to overcome the problems or find a path around them. While we often cannot change the deck that life hands us, we can decide how we are going to play our cards.

I find irony in all of the talk about “change” in this year’s political race, especially as the discussion becomes more heated as we rapidly approach election day. For us and our fellow Jews this is also a season of “change.” However, the change that we are contemplating is not transitive change. That is, we are not dwelling today on how we can change someone else. Rather we are thinking about reflexive change, about how we can change ourselves.

One of the most powerful symbols and rituals of the Rosh Hashana service is the sounding of the *shofar*. The *shofar* calls God’s attention to us and our attention to God. But the *shofar* also sounds a warning. It warns us to focus our attention on ourselves and not allow the opportunity for change to pass. When we sounded the *shofar* we recited the lines that were written by Rabbi Moses Maimonides in the twelfth century which explains the meaning of the *shofar*’s call:

Give heed to the sound of the Shofar,
The sharp, piercing blasts of the Shofar.
Rending the air with its message,
Its call for wholehearted repentance;
Summoning us to our Heavenly Parent
To render God true devotion.

Renounce your sins and transgressions,
False aims and unworthy striving;
Fill your hearts with a new spirit
Of loving concern and forgiveness
Give heed to the sound of the Shofar,
The blast that is blown, O my people.”

As we join in prayer today on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, our thoughts and hearts are centered around change. But the question we ask ourselves is not “How can we improve others?”, but “How can improve ourselves?”

The question for us is not how can our parents be better parents – but how can we be better children?

The question is not: how can we make our husband or wife a more attentive spouse, but how can we be more open to their needs, desires, and dreams?

The question is not: how can we make our boss more appreciative of our efforts, but how can we make sure our work serves our company and clients?

The question is not: how can we make the synagogue meet our needs, but how can we serve the community?

The question is not: how can I fix those things that bother me, but how can I fix myself?

In our prayers and meditations today we do not focus on the shortcomings of others but on our own failures. We admit our wrongdoings, apologize to those we have wronged, ask for God’s forgiveness and guidance, and vow never to repeat our poor actions again.

However, if the central message of Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur is to change

ourselves, then why do we spend so much time on these days also talking about *Tikun Ha-Olam*, changing, perfecting, and healing the world, as well?

It is because, to quote the words of Rabbi Hillel:

וְכִשְׁאֲנִי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

“If I am only for myself, what am I?” (Avot 1:14) Judaism demands that we not allow ourselves to become hemmed in by the four walls of our own concerns, but to reach beyond them to the world at large. We have a Jewish obligation to change the world: to eliminate poverty, want, illness, prejudice, and oppression. Judaism insists we help bring the Biblical visions of brothers and sisters dwelling in unity and human beings practicing war no more to come to life. But don't these goals contradict what I just stated? Doesn't the attainment of these dreams require that we make those around us change?

Judaism absolutely and unequivocally demands that we change the world, but how we accomplish this is not through the use of power or force. Jews do not heal and perfect the world by demanding and insisting that others submit to our will. Rather, in the Jewish quest to bring about a world overflowing with justice and freedom, we follow the path of the Prophet Zechariah.

After the destruction of the first Temple in 586 B.C.E. the Jews of *Eretz Yisrael* were exiled to Babylonia. Babylonia was soon conquered by King Cyrus of Persia. The Jews of Babylonia successfully petitioned King Cyrus to be allowed to return to *Eretz Yisrael* and to rebuild the Temple. Zerubavel, a descendent of Jewish royalty, was chosen to lead the Jews back to their homeland. He wondered how he would accomplish this daunting task, knowing that there would be many obstacles in his way.

The prophet Zechariah told Zerubavel of a vision he had of a golden Menorah. The Menorah symbolized the rebuilt Temple. In the vision God gave Zechariah a message to share with Zerubavel. God told Zerubavel how he would succeed:

לֹא בְחֵיל וְלֹא בְכֹחַ כִּי אִם-בְּרוּחִי אֶמַר ק' צְבָאוֹת

“Not by might, nor by power, but my Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts.” (Zech. 4:6)

Zechariah told Zerubavel that he would rebuild the Temple, but not by might nor by power nor by force. The Jews would reach their goal if they acted in consonance with the Spirit of God.

This is also what we need to do to heal the world: to act in consonance with the Spirit of God. What, exactly, does that mean?

אלא להלך אחר מדותיו של הקב"ה, מה הוא מלביש ערומים... אף אתה הלבש ערומים;
הקב"ה ביקר חולים... אף אתה בקר חולים;

The *midrash* tells us: “As God clothes the naked, you should clothe the naked. The Bible teaches that as the Holy One visited the sick; you should visit the sick. As the Holy One comforted those who mourned; you should comfort those who mourn. As the Holy One buried the dead; you should bury the dead....As the Holy One is faithful, you too must be faithful. As the Holy One is loving, you too must be loving.” (Sotah 14a, Sifre Deut. Ekev)

Judaism does believe in changing the world, but not by might nor by power, but by acting in the Spirit of God, by relating and acting with our fellow human beings in kindness, generosity, care, concern, and love. We change and heal the world through

our gifts of sacrifice and selflessness.

We change and heal the world when we help a poor family eat, as we are doing now through our food bank donations. We change and heal the world when we provide relief or volunteer to aid flood and hurricane victims. We change and heal the world when we gather school supplies to give to the children of the men and women who serve our country.

We change and heal the world when we visit a friend or stranger in the hospital. We change and heal the world when we provide rides for those who can no longer drive. We change and heal the world when we help make up a *minyán* so that mourners can recite *Kaddish*. We change and heal the world when we donate to worthy institutions and causes that aid those in need.

This is a frightening and unsettled time for all citizens of the United States. The current financial crisis, coupled with the ongoing war against terror, has us unsettled. We all know people who have lost their jobs or had their homes repossessed or retirement nest eggs vanish. Every time we walk through an airport we are reminded about the constant threats under which we live. Every night the evening news is consumed with some new crisis. We talk about the need for change. We are desperate for change. But much of what happens around us is beyond our control.

So what are we to do? Clearly, our first priority is making sure our own affairs are in order. We can't protect against every possible harm, but we need to make sure our families are cared for and protected.

But taking care of ourselves is not enough. We must not think only of ourselves, but of those around us as well. No matter how much pain, loss or want we may endure,

there are always many more who are far worse off than we. We have an obligation to help. I remind you of the words of Rabbi Hillel:

וְכִשְׁאַנִּי לְעַצְמִי, מָה אֲנִי

“If I am only for myself, what am I?” and add to them the Talmud’s demand: “Even the poorest of the poor, the one who receives *tzedakah* from the community, must also give *tzedakah* to others.”

Several days after Hurricane Ike devastated Galveston and several other cities on the Texas coast I watched the news. The reporter toured the destruction and interviewed citizens passing out ice, water, and food to victims of the hurricane. The reporter said that the volunteers were not outsiders. They were local citizens whose homes and businesses had been ravaged. When asked why they were here instead of cleaning up their own homes they said that they could not concentrate on their affairs knowing others were worse off. They had to help their neighbors.

Their acts of kindness and selflessness moved me. Their helping others in the face of crisis spoke to me. They made perfect sense. Even though they were in all probability not Jewish, their response to their own loss was very Jewish. They turned tragedy into an opportunity for redemption.

The ways Jews are supposed to respond in times of crisis is not by bemoaning our own losses , but by doing *mitzvot*, by performing *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness, and by sharing whatever blessings we have with others.

In a well known *midrash* the rabbis said that the giving of *tzedakah* does more for the giver than it does for the receiver. As I watched the faces of volunteers in Texas handing out supplies to other victims, I noticed their smiles of joy and contentment. They

proved what the rabbis said. The giving of *tzedakah* does more for the giver than the receiver. By lending a helping hand they healed their own souls.

So may it be for us. When faced with disaster and misery let us remember that when we respond with a helping hand instead of a weeping heart, we not only heal the world, but we heal ourselves.

Rabbi Leonard Rosenthal
Tifereth Israel Synagogue
Yom Kippur 5769

CHOOSE LIFE!

I have long been troubled by the inclusion and centrality of *Eleh Ezkarah*, the Martyrology Service on Yom Kippur.

This section of the *Mahzor* is based on a *midrash* about the *Asarah Harugei Malchut*, the Ten Martyred Rabbis. After the Romans destroyed the Temple in 70 C.E. and obliterated any remaining Jewish autonomy, the Jews of *Eretz Yisrael* seethed with anger and resentment. They never accepted Roman rule and domination. In 132 C.E. Bar Kokhba, who some had proclaimed the Messiah, led the Jews in revolt. In 135 C.E. The Romans, under Emperor Hadrian, beat down the rebels and tortured and murdered their followers in what is now known as the “Hadrianic Persecution.” The torturous deaths of ten of the leading rabbis who opposed the Romans are recounted in today’s service. They are the *Asarah Harugei Malchut*, the Ten Martyred Rabbis, whose deaths we memorialize and honor today.

But what, we may ask, is this lengthy and gruesome account doing in our *Mahzor*? What does the gloom and gore of the *Asarah Harugei Malchut* have to do with Yom Kippur’s message of confession, contrition, forgiveness, and renewal? What lessons are these awful murders and circumstances meant to teach us today as we search for atonement and forgiveness in our own lives?

The poem *Eleh Ezkarah* found in our *Mahzor* was written sometime after the first Crusade which took place in 1096 C.E. It is most certainly an expression of the terror

and anguish experienced by the Jews of Europe who were murdered by Pope Urban II's warriors as they made their way towards Jerusalem. Innocent Jews were killed by the thousands by the Crusaders on their "holy quest" to capture the holy city. The author of *Eleh Ezkara* tried to make sense of the murder of innocents by viewing the death of the slaughtered European Jews through the lens of the ten historical martyrs. *Eleh Ezkara's* author implies that they died *al kiddush hashem*, as willing martyrs, for a holy purpose and the sanctification of God's name.

This literary work of the "Ten Martyred Rabbis" was introduced into the *Mahzor* because of the rationale offered for their deaths. According to Rabbi Max Artz in "Mercy and Justice," a commentary on the High Holy Day liturgy, the Ten Martyrs died not for their own sins, "...but in expiation of the sins of previous generations," specifically the kidnaping of the Biblical Joseph by his ten brothers. The death of the innocents during the Crusades could be seen in the same light: they died for the sins of those who came before them, and perhaps, for the sins of those who came after them as well. Perhaps, their deaths may atone for our sins as well, which is why we recall and remind God of their sacrifice during today's service.

It is obvious why most of us find this explanation of the Martyrology service troubling: it sounds a lot like Christianity. Most Jews believe that it is Christianity, but not Judaism, that affirms that human death atones for sin. Jews believe that each of us is responsible for our own failings and imperfections, and it is the individual who makes atonement for their own wrongdoings by confessing their sins, apologizing to those they have wronged, begging forgiveness from God, and doing deeds of *tzedakah* and lovingkindness. Surrogates may not take our place. Someone else's suffering does not

help our cause. And yet, here, central to our *Yom Kippur* prayers, is this service that speaks of the suffering of martyrs, seemingly reflecting the belief that the righteous sometimes die to atone for the sins of others.

Further complicating the Martyrology service is its expansion in recent years to include those who died in the *Shoah* and those who died fighting for the establishment of *Medinat Yisrael*, the State of Israel. Is the implication that their deaths should be seen in the same light? Are they also martyrs who gave their lives because we have sinned?

Having opened the can of worms, we must now raise the same question about *Yizkor*. On *Yom Kippur* we not only remember the deaths of martyrs, but the deaths of our own loved one as well. But why? What do the deaths of our loved ones have to do with our Day of Atonement? By the inclusion of prayers for our own dead, are we somehow intimating that they also gave their lives for our sins?

There is a simple single word answer to all of these questions: “no.” While acknowledging that suffering may lead to human growth, physical pain and asceticism have never been seen as positive or productive Jewish values. Unlike some other religious traditions, Christianity and Islam in particular, Judaism is a religion which neither encourages nor celebrates martyrdom.

A lot has already been said about the rewards of martyrdom promised by radical Muslims which include numerous heavenly rewards for those who murder in the name of God. I do not want to review the martyr-ideal of radical Islam here. Additionally, the radical approach to martyrdom is not shared by all Muslims. I would, however, like to spend a few minutes talking about the Christian values of martyrdom and suffering so as to better understand the Jewish view.

Before I continue I want to make clear that my intention in sharing Christian beliefs is not to critique or discredit Christianity. I remind you of how Jews view any belief system: Jews are not concerned with how a person thinks or believes. Rather we are concerned with how they act. If a Christian's belief in Jesus suffering for their sins leads them to living a more giving and generous life, than *tavo eilav bracha*, may they receive a blessing for their faith, a blessing from the God of all of us. I only outline the Christian view on suffering to clarify the Jewish view, and to share with you my understanding of the inclusion of the Martyrology and Yizkor in today's service.

So much for the disclaimer!

Christians believe suffering and death do have redemptive power. The belief in suffering as redemptive is at the center of Christianity's core narrative. Christians believe that Jesus suffered and died to atone for their sins and see those who suffer as living in his image.

During the last two years of Pope John Paul II's life he was plagued with a variety of ailments. Whenever the Pope was seen in public he was in obvious pain and your heart went out to him.

The following is what Marc A. Thiessen wrote about Pope John Paul II's suffering in the March 31, 2004 issue of the National Review:

"In carrying on, John Paul II also offers us a precious gift: his suffering. It is hard to see him suffer. But this pope does not ask for relief from his sufferings. To the contrary, a bishop once told me that the pope used to refuse medication precisely because it interfered with his suffering. He has a mystical relationship with his suffering, offering it up for us, and for the whole world — a world that increasingly embraces the

culture of death, euthanasia, and the abortion of disabled fetuses, because it mistakenly believes there is no greater moral good than relief from suffering. In bearing his pain, John Paul says to us, in union with the Apostle Paul, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions."

"We need his example in this world filled with suffering. We need the lesson he is teaching us: that suffering is not useless; that it can have meaning, and salvific power. As John Paul wrote in his 1984 encyclical *On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering*, once this meaning and power are discovered, suffering actually becomes 'a source of joy' because 'faith in sharing the suffering of Christ brings with it the interior certainty that the suffering person...is serving, like Christ, the salvation of his brothers and sisters. Therefore he is carrying out an irreplaceable service.' (Marc A. Thiessen, *National Review*, March 31, 2005)

In opposition to Christianity Judaism is not a religion that is based on suffering or death. Judaism teaches us to enjoy the world God has given us, to alleviate pain and suffering, and above all, to choose life.

In the Sinai Desert Moses said to the Children of Israel:

קִּעַדְתִּי בְּכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ חַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה
וּבַחֲרָתְךָ בְּחַיִּים לְמַעַן תִּבְחַרְךָ אֶתְּךָ וְזָרַעְךָ:

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—by loving the Lord your God, heeding His commands, and holding fast to Him." (Deut. 30:19&20)

The Psalmist also makes clear his preference for life over death when he calls upon God to deal graciously with him and grant him long life:

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, for I languish;
heal me, O Lord, for my bones shake with terror...

O Lord, turn! Rescue me!

Deliver me as befits Your faithfulness.

כִּי אֵין בַּמָּוֹת זְכוּרָה בְּשֵׂאוֹל מִי יוֹדֵה-לָךְ:

For there is no praise of You among the dead;
in Sheol, who can acclaim You?” (Psalm 6:4-6)

And choosing life over death is a constant theme in today’s service:

“O God who forgives, You are gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger,
abounding in mercy and goodness. You desire the repentance of the wicked, not their
death, as the prophet Ezekiel declared:

חַי־אֲנִי | נֶאֱמַר | אֲדַנְיָ ק' אִם-אֶחָפֵץ בְּמוֹת הַרְשָׁע כִּי אִם-בְּשׁוּב רָשָׁע מִדַּרְצוֹ וְחָיָה שׁוּבוּ

שׁוּבוּ מִדַּרְכֵיכֶם הַרְעִים וְלָמָּה תִּמְוֹתוּ בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל:

‘As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked but
that he abandon his ways and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways, for why should you
die, O house of Israel?’” (Neilah, Ez. 33:10)

Jews do not welcome suffering. We are not only permitted, but commanded to
seek the aid of physicians and others who can heal or alleviate pain. *Pikuach nefesh*,
the preservation of human life, takes precedence over almost every other
commandment in the Torah. Today, for example, those who are ill or infirm not only are
to refrain from fasting, they are forbidden to fast.

Even fasting itself on Yom Kippur is not seen as a way we physically punish

ourselves for our past misdeeds. Ra'ah, fasting today is supposed to help us focus all of our attention and energy on doing *Teshuva* and personal improvement. It also reminds us that many people face hunger each day and that it is our obligation to help feed them.

Historically, martyrdom was not welcomed nor sought by Jews who were killed because they were Jews. The zealots of Masada fought valiantly until defeat was inevitable, and then took their own lives to mock and frustrate their enemies. Jews condemned by the Inquisition did all they could to escape their fate, including in many cases converting to Christianity. The victims of the *Shoah* protested and sobbed and wailed when they could not escape their fate. In all of these examples the victims did not welcome death. They did everything in their power to live.

Jews affirm life. But if we affirm life why do we dwell on the story of the Ten Martyred Rabbis in today's service? While it is possible to see the story as one of redemptive suffering, I offer an another interpretation.

To begin with, it is important to note that in *Eleh Ezkerah*, it is not the Jews who see the death of the ten rabbis as atoning for the sins of Joseph's ten brothers, but rather their Roman prosecutors:

The tyrant asked "What is the law if a man is found stealing his brother, one of the children of Israel, and makes merchandise of him and sells him?"

The sages instantly replied, "That thief shall die."

And the despot said, "They are your ancestors who sold their brother Joseph to the Ishmaelites. If they were living I would pronounce sentence against them as you have spoken, but now you must bear your father's sin." (Translation: Silverman Mahzor)

But if it was the Romans and not the Jews who saw the death of the rabbis as making up for the deceit of Joseph's brothers, then how did the authors of the *midrash* and *mahzor* understand their deaths? It seems to me that they understood the Ten Martyred Rabbis as exemplars for the Jewish people not because of how they *died*, but because of how they *lived*.

These rabbis were so committed to Judaism and its message of a living loving God who cares passionately about all creatures and wants them to live justly and compassionately, that even the threat of death did not deter them from studying and teaching God's Torah. Despite the dangers, they continued not only to practice Judaism but to educate future generations of Jews. They were undeterred by those who wanted to extinguish Judaism and its message of dignity, freedom, and rights for all human beings. It is not that they wanted to die, they wanted to live, but living without Torah was also a type of death.

A story is told about Rabbi Akiba, one of the ten martyrs. One day his disciples asked him why he continued to study Torah despite the danger. He answered with the following story:

One day a fish was swimming in a stream. A hungry fox happened by and saw the fish's struggles. The fox approached the stream and said: "My dear fish friend, I need to warn you about the danger ahead. While coming here I passed a fisherman who was casting his net in these waters. He will surely catch you!"

"Oh, my, said the fish. What am I to do?"

"I know," said the crafty fox. "Why don't you come here, to the edge of the water. I will lift you out, put you on my back, and carry you past the fisherman's net. Then I will

put you back in.”

The fish began swimming toward the bank, but at the very last minute, darted back into the stream out of the fox’s clutches.

“Now you’ve done it!” said the fox. “You are sure to be on someone’s dinner plate tonight!”

“Perhaps,” said the fish, “but not for certain. Perhaps I will be able to swim around the net or perhaps the fisherman will leave. But I know that as long as I am in the water I have a fighting chance. However, the minute I come out of the water I will surely die.”

“So it is for the Jewish people,” Rabbi Akiba told his disciples. “As long as we study Torah we have a chance at survival, but the minute we stop we will surely die. We will be like fish out of water.”

Rabbi Akiba and his colleagues chose to live their lives filled with Torah and God, rather than subject themselves to tyranny. But they did not choose death and martyrdom. The Romans made the choice for them.

It was the same for those who were murdered during the *Shoah*. They, too, did not choose death or martyrdom. The victims of the *Shoah* chose life. The Nazis and their allies made another choice for them. When I remember the victims of the *Shoah* today I do not dwell on how they suffered or died, but rather on the lives they led and the rich Jewish culture, heritage, and values by which they lived. I think about the Jewish learning and celebration that enlivened their lives and the love and care they lavished on their family and friends. I honor them today not because I think their deaths had meaning, but because of how they lived their lives. As I consider my own path in the

year and years ahead I hope and pray that I can bring into my life at least a little of what made their lives so precious and special.

And so may it be with all of the memories of the relatives and friends we remember and mourn during *Yizkor* today. We should not think about how they died, but rather how they lived. When I sit with families mourning the death of a loved one, they are often filled with stories and emotions concerning that person's last few days and weeks on earth. This is understandable since that experience is still fresh and painful. I reassure them that, in time, some of the pain and suffering and bad memories of these last few days and hours will diminish and be replaced by happier memories of their loved one's healthier and more active days.

Yizkor prayers, during which we remember our loved ones, are not included in our Yom Kippur service to make us sad and add to our pain, but rather to uplift us. As we remember our parents, spouses, children, siblings, and friends, we should not think about the difficulties or challenges they faced in life, but rather of their successes and celebrations. We should focus on the values by which they lived, the examples they set, and how they inspired us and those around them. We should remember all that was good and true and beautiful about them and incorporate these qualities into our own lives and relationships. We should look to their memories to guide us in our own search for community and fulfilling relationships as we approach the New Year.

Our heritage teaches us to scorn death and choose life, but the type of life we lead is in our hands alone. As we begin our Yizkor service, let us look to the memories of all those who have gone before us to inspire us to lead happier, more fulfilled, more giving, and more loving lives in this year and the years ahead.