

What Do I Believe? Kol Nidre 5776

Let's think about a big meal! Yes, I do know that we are not supposed to eat tonight, but go with me for a minute. Actually, I am thinking of a specific, big holiday meal. It usually consists of many courses and can take place over several hours. I am thinking of the *Pesah* seder. Mmmmm...*Matzah*....

But the moment I want to think about does not involve the food, it is the four sons, or the four children, who ask questions about the proceedings.

The wicked child asks: "*Ma Ha-avodah Hazot Lakhem?* – what does this service [mean] to you?"

Now, the reality is that this question is not really different from that of the wise child who asks: "What are the laws that God has commanded you?"

Both of them exclude themselves, although you could argue that the wicked child excludes himself a bit more strongly.

Think about it: this is actually NOT a bad question. In fact, it's a great question. The wicked child may or may not be wicked (we do not know anything about his other behavior), but his question is fine. What is all this about? Why are we doing this? These commandments? Prayers? Rituals? Fasting? What is the meaning behind all this?

It is a great question.

It is a question that Rabbi Fel and I are asked all the time, maybe even more and more these days. What does all this mean?



Why should I even be Jewish?

These are great questions. Several members of our *shul* actually asked me to address them and, although I don't always take sermon requests, I'm taking this one.

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To answer these questions, let me share what I believe.

Before I respond, let me share some caveats – this is what I believe, not necessarily what I know. I am not sure of it; my thinking has evolved over time and I hope that it will continue to do so. Most importantly, you do not have to believe it. I am not sharing my philosophy of life and Judaism in order to persuade you, but to give you a glimpse of my own thinking.

If it's good and you like it, fine; but actually, I would rather hear your thoughts. We could have a real dialogue, bouncing our ideas back and forth until new understandings emerge from the interchange. That's what I

am doing with some of our teens in my Wednesday night Prozdor class, but it will not work as well with 1,200 of you and one of me, so here goes.

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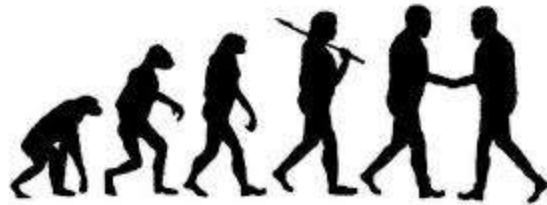
What do I believe?

First, I believe we exist.

This is not meant as a joke, just an important philosophical starting point. Some have posited that we may all be an elaborate computer simulation and not actually exist. I am not in that camp. We exist. Which leads me to: Where did we come from?

I believe that human beings evolved over the 13.8 billion years this universe has existed.

Unlike some of our presidential candidates, I believe in evolution. Having examined various explanations for the universe and some of the data, this seems most plausible to me.



By the way, that belief does not mean that I do not have space to appreciate the creation narrative in the Torah; I do. It just answers different questions like why we exist and how we should behave rather than how we have come to exist.

So, we exist and have evolved over billions of years.

Now, although some scientists claim that the universe exploded into being by accident; in other words, that we can find no causation for the universe, I would humbly beg to differ.

Let me explain it this way – even if the universe hiccupped into being due to a random “glitch” in the space-time continuum and God did not cause it, it begs the question.

Why is there a space-time continuum which we inhabit?

There should be nothing. Nothing at all. Now, since there is something (we are sitting here) where there should be nothing – something purposeful is going on.

Who created the space-time continuum? Or, if you say it always existed, then why? What is that existence?

Well, our name for that “existence” is *Adonai*, meaning God: four

Hebrew letters: *Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh*. As God tells Moshe at the Burning Bush, the Divine’s name is: “*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* – I will be what I will be.” Or,



another translation: “I am what I am.” Or, simply: “I am.” I am existence. God and the space-time continuum are one.

Now, you may be saying to yourself: “So, what?” Or you may be saying: “I am getting hungry.” But what you want to know is what difference does all this make?

Well, it makes a big difference. If there is a God Whom we call *Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh*, then why did this *Yod, Heh, Vav, Heh* create the universe or the space-time continuum?

For that, we have to speculate. But it is not much of a stretch to say that there must have been a reason. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

taught, God is in search of humankind. God created the universe because God wanted something – to be known or not to be lonely. God is in search of us. And we, in turn, yearn for God.

Once there is a God and God wants a universe where people could evolve, it follows that God cares about these creations. God cares about us. Not only does God love us and want us to exist, but, like a good parent, God wants to teach us how to do well. Thus, God does not control us or the future or make events happen, but I believe that God sends out spiritual energy for us to access. That energy can bring us close to the Divine, helping us find ways to perfect the world in the image of God, *l'takein olam b'malkhut Shaddai*, in the words of the *Aleinu* prayer.

This spiritual energy is flowing all the time – sometimes, we can feel it in the midst of an intense conversation with a friend or loved one. Or we can feel it when we have a new insight or moment of keen awareness.



Some people cultivate the ability to access even more of this divine flow; they become prophets. The rabbis teach that many people passed the Burning Bush, but only Moses had developed the sensitivity to see that something was different.

For our people, Sinai becomes the moment of experiencing God's revelation on a grand-scale. And from that encounter and the thousands of years of our people's understandings of how to live a moral and meaningful

life, we have our Torah, our *halakhah*, Jewish law (although it literally means the way to walk). We have a way to walk through our lives.

While I believe our Torah is divinely inspired from the flow of divine energy that was harnessed at Sinai, I understand that our people wrote down the Torah over the course of generations. It is sacred both in its origin and due to the holiness that our people have given it over the millennia.

Our people have produced not just a map about where to turn in making ethical and ritual choices, they gave us a system that works – our traditions educate us, teach us how to be a *mensch*, they fill our lives with meaningful actions that reinforce the values of learning, *hesed* (acts of loving-kindness), and community. They bring us closer to our families and friends. They create feelings of solidarity and peoplehood. They help us move ourselves and the world toward redemption.

While there are many paths within Judaism, our centrist path is most meaningful to me. It declares that the chain of traditions starting with Moses on Sinai down to us today is not broken, it is alive and well. While we might update it based on new ideas or new information, it must be binding for it to retain its power. It is not going to work unless we give it the strength it needs.

That means that, for example, it might be hard to keep kosher, but we must be engaged in it. Infusing our eating with moral Jewish values is far too central to ignore. It might be tiring to wake up each morning and put on *tefillin*, but it is still required. The laws of Shabbat can be restrictive, but they create the space for a day like no other.

Today, we must continue to create a new type of centrist Judaism – one that borrows the best from other movements, while retaining our values and beliefs. That is exactly what Rabbi Fel and I try to do here at Emunah.

Some examples:

We want our community to emulate the passion for *tikkun olam* of Reform synagogues that work tirelessly on behalf of those in need, creating communities that are fully engaged in social action and social justice.

We want our community to be like Orthodox synagogues where large numbers of Jews take Shabbat seriously – coming to shul and transforming our most holy day (really even holier than today!) into a day where we all come together. We should also work to build relationships and share meals as Orthodox Jews do where people are invited over and food is brought to those who are ill, or in mourning, or those celebrating the birth of a child.

We want our community to be like Reconstructionist synagogues where LGBT Jews are welcomed and where couples where one partner is not Jewish can find a home for themselves.



We want our community to be like Israeli communities, as well, filled with joyful Israeli music and culture.

We want our community to be like a Jewish summer camp where feelings of fun, friendliness, and camaraderie permeate our halls and walls.

While, thankfully, we already do all these things, we can do them more and more.

Over the eleven years that I have been here, we have tried to do just that. We have brought more of the intensity of our traditional practices to our *shul*, while striving to innovate and make Emunah even more inclusive.

Some examples: we have added more traditional prayers and practices into our *davening*, into our prayer services, so we now have the *Birkat Kohanim*, the ancient blessing in its traditional form, but for the first time in 3,000 years, women also participate in this ritual!

We have strengthened our *kashrut* observance, as we now certify the *kosher* slicer at Stop and Shop and the fruit bowls at Wilson Farm.

We have reached out to couples where one partner is not Jewish. [This year, I wrote and published with the Rabbinical Assembly the first-ever ceremony for a couple where one partner is not Jewish.](#) It is a home-based ceremony putting up a *mezuzah* in the home, while celebrating the love of the couple and the commitment they are making to build a Jewish home together. A pretty big first, if I may say so myself.

We should also note our inclusion work – both in terms of people who are differently-abled and how we welcome those who are gay, lesbian, or transgendered. Same-sex weddings and *aufrufs* have been held at Temple Emunah.

This year, we added the recitation of *tahanun* – intense personal supplicatory prayers at *Minhah* (the afternoon service), but we also added



singing as part of it. This blending of the old and new is exactly what we all need.

I love traditional davening and I love meditation. I need both – I need the ancient wisdom of our tradition and I need the new [Eitan Katz Elul Niggun](#) that Rabbi Fel and David Srebnick introduced this year.

We can make our approach to Judaism the “best of” approach. We blend the best of all the movements. That is another aspect of our community that is so enriching and so compelling. In many ways, we function as a pluralistic community, even as we operate within the dimensions – spacious they may be – of Conservative Judaism.

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All of this reminds me of a small moment that I shared with our son Ari in late August. I was still in my sling from my recent shoulder surgery and he wanted to do a fun activity so we headed to the Charles to kayak together. Since I could barely row, he did the brunt of the work (how that went might be a sermon for another time!), but along the way, he asked me about God, the

universe, why we practice, and why we pray. I answered him and, through the paddles’ ripples, a special conversation was held.



While I am not sure I explained anything so well, I did sense something – a closeness, the feeling of God’s presence. And I was reminded that each of us has to formulate our own theology of Judaism, our own understanding of how this universe operates and how we can make a meaningful life for ourselves.

I pray that we can all paddle together through the waters of our tradition, learning from others and building a deeply Jewish, egalitarian, and welcoming community that can teach us and future generations the meaning of this 4,000 year old tradition with which we have been so blessed. Thank you all for being my partners in this quest.