

Shmini Atzeret 5773
Rabbi Stephen Lerner
“Reflecting on 45 Years in the Rabbinate”

Some years ago a young rabbi came to his new congregation filled with ideas and enthusiasm. At his first service, he spoke movingly about the power of Shabbat. The shul president complimented him on his talk but added that maybe he shouldn't talk about Shabbat too much. After all, the president said, we have storekeepers who are open on Shabbat and doctors with office hours that day. The rabbi listened carefully.

The following week, the rabbi spoke insightfully about kashrut. Again the president complimented him but cautioned against another sermon on food rules. After all, lots of people don't keep kosher, and kosher meat costs too much, as do four sets of dishes. Once again the rabbi signaled his assent.

The third Shabbat the rabbi spoke about the beauty of Sukkot. Again, after praising the rabbi, the president suggested that his spiritual leader remove Sukkot from his sermonic plate as well. People he noted have just taken off work for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur; it would be hard for them to give up more days.

Finally, the rabbi's frustration came to a boil. “What do you want me to speak about?” he exclaimed.

“That's easy”, the president replied, “talk about Judaism”!

This morning, I'll talk about my Judaism.

Judaism is built around the triad, God, Torah and Israel. God sets up a brit, a covenant, a contract with Israel, the Jewish people. He sets the Torah as the terms of the agreement. We are supposed to study and live by it.

Obviously, the starting point is the Kadosh Barukh Hu, the Blessed Holy One, the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, Adonai Elohenu, the Lord our God, or any one of the hundred or more names of Avinu, Malkenu, our father, our King. I think that, like many other rabbis, I have not talked about God very much and that for all of us God does not loom as large as He should. (Yes I know God is not masculine, but I'm not happy with She or It, and I want to retain the sense of a God who is real, not just a theory.)

I came to a belief in God through my sense of wonder at the saga of the Jewish people. After all the vicissitudes of our history, it seems to me amazing that our people, after being conquered and squelched in our own land and then forced into a demeaning, scorned minority status in the countries of the world throughout our history, nevertheless are here to tell our story.

Like Yehudah HaLevi, the great medieval Hebrew poet and anti-philosopher, I believe that our God speaks to us in the history of our people. Whether or not

He spoke to 600,000 on Mount Sinai, your presence here this evening tells me that there is a God Who wants to see us endure. After all, after what we have been through, why would anyone want to remain Jewish? Why would anyone want to become Jewish? Thus in ways I cannot and dare not explain, the mystery of the Jewish people's continued creative existence and witness reflects the mystery of God's actions on this planet.

If my God is a God of history, Avinu, our Father, is also a God of caring. He is concerned for the forgotten -- the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger. We don't hear of His special concern for the rich. They can, as we all know too well, take care of themselves. We are supposed to emulate God and like Him engage in deeds of tzedakah, justice and charity, as we hear in U'Netaneh Tokef, the great piyyut, religious poem, of this season. Sadly, I do not hear from either of our supposedly religious candidates for this land's highest office much of the compassionate side of God, that dimension we are supposed to emulate.

My God is also a God of wonder. When I look at a sunset, or watch the ocean off the Delaware shore, or see my seventeen-month old granddaughter running to me shouting daba because saba, grandpa, is still too hard for her to say, I believe that there is a God who makes all these things possible.

I find no philosophical proofs of God cogent—they bore me. Faith is something you either have or you don't. Any person with any sense of history will find

Jewish history remarkable, sunsets beautiful and the young human life generally quite astounding, but it does not necessarily flow from this that God made it all possible. You either say there is more to life than we see, that there is the One, Adonai Ehad, the Only who is the source of all wonder or you find nothing beyond the beauty of your vision.

Yet my faith is not pure, unchallenged. It comes after wrestling with some degree of doubt. I believe that God has given human beings free will, that we are born with the yetser hara, an impulse to evil, which, if controlled, is necessary for all creative endeavor, but if unsheathed totally, is responsible for every evil. Thus, even if I grant that the Holocaust was the product of unfettered pure evil impulses and the failure of the good impulses of the so-called civilized nations to stop it faster, I still want to ask God: "Almighty, when the Nazis had killed a few hundred thousand Jews, we learned the truth of the sinister side of human freedom. The point was made. Why did you not end the nightmare and save millions more people?"

About this, about tragic deaths, about plagues, and earthquakes, we have to admit that as we can only know that God is and know no more of God, so we must admit as Job learned that we cannot penetrate the ways of God. So my faith is imperfect. I am not as bold as Reb Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, the great Hassidic leader who challenged God to protect His people, but I'd like to hear God's answers to questions about the existence of evil in God's good world.

Judaism flows from a meeting of God with the Jewish people. The centerpiece of our faith is that encounter and the brit, the covenant, the agreement that develops. He is Our God and we are His people. Our task is to be witnesses for God by living the life of His teachings, while His agreement is to make sure that at least some of us endure, that we are here today and every day.

This covenant relationship and the behirah, chosenness, which flows from it, should not designate any superiority. It simply means serving in God's vanguard. Atem Aydai, God calls to u--You are My witnesses. I can't think of a greater honor than being chosen by God. Like all other human beings, we want to live lives of peace and tranquility, lives of value, of love and friendship. We are like every other group, every other individual. But yet there is a crucial difference: we have been given a grand calling, a gift bestowed upon us by the Lords of Hosts. We are to witness for God, playing a special role in realizing God's plan. But with glory comes burden and challenge. When people want no more of God and goodness, they turn against His people to express their anger, their outrage. Indeed it has been said that one can judge a society by how it treats its Jews. All too often we absorb the slings and arrows that want to tear down God's moral teaching. It is not easy. But I am convinced that because we matter in God's plan God has filled enough of us with the strength and conviction to surmount the challenges, to continue with glory. We have the privilege of saying yes when there are so many no's.

Our way is not the way of exalted terminology or theological conundrum, but it is the way of Torah, of following the entire range of Jewish learning and living that begins with the Torah, the Five Books of Moses, the Humash, the Pentateuch, and is to be found throughout our history in every Jewish work that tries to help uncover what God wants of us.

I do not believe that the Torah is the perfect revelation of our God. There are some troubling passages like the command to wipe out the Canaanite nations; there are strange tales, like the three stories of Abraham and Isaac and their wives whom they introduce as their sisters in their travels; and there are over-detailed sections like much of the last third of Exodus with its plan for and the actual building of the mishkan, the wilderness sanctuary. I cannot say that occasional verses of harshness are from God, nor can I attribute to God huge sections of such utter pedestrianism. But there are sparks of light in the Torah, which reveal God's design for us. Perhaps none is more important than kedoshim tihiyu, you shall be holy, at the start of the 19th chapter of VaYikra, Leviticus. God is kadosh, holy, set apart, magnificent in His uniqueness. He calls us to follow His lead. How can we be holy too?

Here the Torah offers a blueprint. We are to follow a way of life whose beginning is detailed in the Torah and developed throughout history. Moses responds to God and generations inspired by that encounter continue to build the blueprint.

In this command to seek holiness, we find for ourselves as individuals a path to bring us closer to God and a way to maintain the special path that God has given the Am Yisrael, the Jewish people. Thus, the tradition should be largely binding on us even as we may make some small adjustments to incorporate new ethical insights and social realities.

The laws of kashrut call us to maintain our distinctiveness as a special people unto God. But circumstances have changed. For the first time since early Roman times, we are not scorned and sequestered in many countries. We are now full partners in a larger society. How can we maintain our distinctiveness, our obligation to God, and also fulfill our obligation to our fellow citizens? How can we be a people apart and yet a people integrated into the larger society? It means some changes are in order, permitting, for example, a very slight modification of the rules of kashrut so that we can, by eating dairy products in non-kosher settings under certain circumstances, interact with non-religious fellow Jews, non-Jewish family, friends and business associates.

It means making slight modifications to include the larger world in some of our prayers. Many of you are aware that when we recite the prayer for the sick on Shabbat I add holey umot haolam to holay Yisrael, a wish for healing of the sick of the nations of the world along with the sick of Israel. Perhaps we should modify the brakhah for health recited every weekday in the Amidah. We speak of rofay holay Amo Yisrael--let us add the nations of the world there as well. We conclude the Amidah in this time of year with Barukh Atah

Adonai Oseh HaShalom--Praised are You O Lord who Makes Peace. Let's say it all year instead of the formula, which is used "who blesses His People Israel with Peace."

Certainly what I have said is not very radical. Kashrut remains important, the structure of our prayer service is maintained— but small changes are introduced so that we can be true to our vision to be a people apart, and yet to accommodate the welcome reality that we are also a people together.

Judaism is not just about our share in the Jewish people; it is about our personal relationship to God and His world. We confess our sins in the plural; we are concerned for the spiritual health of community, but we also retain our desire to correct our individual flaws, the errors that weaken our ties to the Almighty.

Thus the call to be holy speaks not merely to the Jewish people as a whole but to each of us as well. When we observe the rules of kashrut, we are appreciating the great gifts that God has given us, we make our table an avenue to connect with God. When we recite a blessing before we eat, we connect with Atah, the You, the Thou that is God and we again and again appreciate the gifts that God has given us.

When we wake up in the morning and recite Modeh Anee, I give thanks to you for restoring my soul, and when we go to sleep and proclaim the Shema, we affirm how fortunate we are to be alive, to be Jews, God's copartners in this world. Our lives can become majestic paths of richness, of celebration, finding in our

rituals and mitzvot avenues to awaken and sustain our sense of wonder and even to enhance it.

Truly then we can say: “Happy are we. How good is our portion, how pleasant is our destiny and how lovely is our heritage.”