

Rosh HaShanah Day 2 5785

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Boker Tov, Hag Sameach, Shana Tovah! At the beginning of Elul, the

Jewish month leading to Rosh HaShana, I attended a concert at

Congregation Emanu El performed by a Jewish musician named Eliana

Light. She has recorded several albums and is an entertaining Jewish

educator. The music was beautiful; maybe it is because of the time of

year we are in now, but the concert touched my soul. Two of the songs

that she sang came from Psalm 27, a psalm traditionally recited twice a

day morning and evening starting on the first day of Elul until the final

day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah. In our Machzor and Siddur it is

referred to as A Psalm for the Season of Repentance (and can be found on page 44 of our Machzorim). One of the central tenets of this psalm is how it wrestles with so many different aspects of faith.

Faith or *Emunah* is a complex word for a complex subject. When I speak about faith, I am talking about how I envision God, and God's role in my life and in the world. Faith in Judaism is dynamic. I know in my own life my faith has grown and changed. I learned from my teacher, Professor Rabbi Neil Gillman, that our theology, which is an articulation of our faith, should not be static. Just like our faith, our thoughts and conceptions of what comprises our faith should grow and evolve. It is healthy to examine what we mean when we say we believe in God.

There is not one answer to this question. Nor is there a constant answer. Our ancestor, Jacob, was named Yisrael: the one who strives, wrestles, and struggles with God. We are all God wrestlers and sometimes that battling is with the question of if we even believe at all. That is healthy. Be not afraid to doubt. We are people who persevere in part because we question.

The songs from Eliana come from three verses in Psalm 27. These verses serve as spring board for exploring the issues of faith. Let's look closer at those verses.

The First is verse 7:

שְׁמַע־ה' קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנּוּנִי וְעֲנֵנִי :

Hear, Adonai, when I cry/call out;

be graceful to me/ show me favor and answer me. (Psalms 27:7)

This verse articulates one of our most basic Jewish desires; for God to hear us. When we cry out, to know that it is not falling on deaf ears. In reality, prayer can often feel like speaking into a void. We want to be heard. We want to be consoled. We want to be answered. But most of the time this feeling is left as an aspiration and not a reality. It is a test of faith. Is God listening? Can we rely on Him, or do we have to do it ourselves? By doing it ourselves, does that mean that there is no influence from God? Why shouldn't I answer a question with a question; Judaism embraces this mystery. It does not say those with

doubts or those that lack faith are bad Jews, rather it acknowledges that interacting with God is not meant to be clear or simple. Almost as if knowing this conundrum would exist, the psalm acknowledges the difficulty of this relationship with the almighty and grounds us with its concluding verses:

לֹוֹלֵא הָאֲמֵנִתִי לְרֵאוֹת בְּטוֹבֵהוּ בְּאֶרֶץ חַיִּים :

קִוֵּה אֱלֹהֵי חֲזַק וַיִּצְמַח לְבַבִּי וְקִוֵּה אֱלֹהֵי : { פ }

If only I could trust/believe that I would see God's goodness in the land of the living...

Hope in Adonai,

Be strong take courage, and hope in Adonai (Psalms 27:12-13)

The writer of this psalm took the time to not only praise God but to express how we, as Jews, have doubts. A yearning to know that which we cannot know. It is an expression of melancholy and skepticism that is a sign of healthy faith. We are left hanging and then told to hope in God, be brave and resolute by hoping in God. In other words: we cannot be certain, but we can choose to believe.

The hope in God is what keeps me grounded. I cannot prove that there is a God, as much as I wish I could. For **me** the choice is to believe in God. Because without God, life seems rudderless. The world seems capricious and scary. My belief in God helps me have a beacon in which to direct my hopes and aspirations. It allows me to have a purposeful

life and know there is more in life than my base desires. The New Year is a time to take stock of where we are. And any good analysis consists of asking thought provoking questions. The hard part is that not all questions have answers. For me, the role of faith is to allow me to face the unknowns of the world and life. We do not know what will happen. Part of the humility of the season is acknowledging that we do not know what we do not know.

For me, when I read the words of Psalm 27 for a bit longer than a month and a half, I am inspired to do what I would like God to do. I have faith God is listening, though I do not always feel God's answers. I have faith I am being guided even when I do not always feel God's hand

on my shoulder. I take that belief and translate it into action. I strive to listen to others and be gracious. I will try to answer when I can. And that does not necessarily mean with words. It means giving that hug to a friend in need or reaching out and checking in with someone you haven't heard from in a while. Seeking to make the world better.

Greeting people with a smile. Bravely facing a new day. Finding a way to share your gifts with the world. Doing what you can to make the world better.

Faith is challenging to have. There are probably many here today who listen to me talking about faith in God and are turned off. They have experienced too much loss, randomness, or silence in response to their



prayers for faith and belief in God to give them meaning. I can understand that. Judaism understands that. All I can say is I see you. I support you and I still want to walk beside you. Judaism is not only a religion and a culture, but also a faith in each other. Acting in the way we want God or our idea of God to be, even if we never experience that relationship ourselves.

Psalm 27 helps us understand that we do not need to have all the answers or even all the questions. We can be inconsistent. We can project a feeling of assuredness and deep fear at the same time.

We as Jews are complex and contradictory and that is ok. My hope for you this New Year is that you find something that can anchor you. If it is

not a belief in God, perhaps it can be this community or your family.

We all have circumstances in our lives that center us, enliven us, and

help us to look beyond ourselves. Our journeys with faith are akin to

the ocean tides, they can ebb and flow. Let us be inspired by tide

pools, as they are places of incredible diversity that enable complex

webs of life. The importance is to engage with ideas. Let your path of

inquiry lead you to finding what you need to translate your hopes into

action for a better tomorrow. I pray whatever your path, may it bring

you peace and strength.

Be Strong and Take Courage as you face the New Year.

Shana Tovah U'Metukah – A Good and Sweet New Year.