

Yom Kippur Morning  
September, 14, 2013  
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It was a late October afternoon, around four decades ago, in Corpus Christi. The sun was setting, the air was chill and the semi-darkness of dusk was settling in. The doorbell rang so I left my study, walked through the secretary's office, and opened the door. That is when it happened.

There, framed in the doorway, stood two frumpy looking middle-aged ladies, unblinking, motionless, perfectly still. It gave me a bit of a shock the way they just stood there staring through the door. I opened it and then, with that great presence of mind by which I'm known far and wide, I said, "Hello."

Finally one of the ladies responded. She said, unsmilingly, "We're Christians." I said, "Hey...that's nice."

Again, the silence as we stared at each other. At last, I spoke the words that have always caused me trouble all of my life. I said, "Can I be of help?"

The silent one remained silent, but the other one – the spokeslady – said, "We have a document we want you to read for us. We think it's Hebrew."

"All right," I said. And, as she was fumbling for the document in her bag, I asked, "And where did you ladies find this document?"

The spokeslady pointed to the silent one and said, "She wrote it." That's when the shock returned. I said, "If she wrote it, why doesn't she translate it for you?"

"She doesn't know Hebrew!"

"Oh," I said, looking for another exit which I knew did not exist.

"She heard the Word of God and she wrote it down," the woman explained. "We know it's the absolute, true Word of God and we think it's in Hebrew."

Now who could argue with that kind of scholarly reasoning? So, I took the paper and studied it. It was filled with meaningless dots and dashes and scribbles. I stared at it very carefully. I turned it upside down and sideways. Finally I rendered my considered judgment.

"I'm sorry, ladies, but this is not Hebrew."

"Are you sure?" she snapped at me. What I wanted to say was, "Have I ever lied to you before?" Instead, I solemnly affirmed, "Yes, I am certain."

Finally, the silent author of this deathless piece of literature spoke. She said, "Maybe it's Arabic." And I responded, "I'm sorry, ladies, there are actually a lot of languages that this isn't, and Arabic is one of them."

She snatched the paper from my hand and said, "We'll ask a Ay-rab!" The two departed, leaving me in the darkened doorway saying over and over to myself: this is going to find its way into a few good sermons.

Of course, I never would have done it, but for a fleeting moment, I was sorry that I had not translated it. I could have told them anything...they were that anxious to believe.

I watched them walk away clinging to that piece of paper which contained all truth and knowledge, if only they could find out what it said. In a simplistic and irrational way, they had something to believe in. They were so sure that they had ultimate truth, that I almost envied them.

On this great and holy day of our religious calendar, don't you, too? Something more substantial than those ladies, of course. Wouldn't you like something you can really believe?

If you're not sure that there's anyone or anything at the other end of your prayers, you are not alone. In a Harris Poll survey of a few years ago, 20% of those who identify themselves as Jews, claim that they don't believe in God and another 25% aren't sure. Of course, the phone responses are affected by the questioner and by social convention and by the concerns of the respondent as to what the questioner means by the word "God" but those are the highest statistics of all identified religious groups. That still leaves 55% of American Jews who say (over the phone) that they believe in God. Yet only 12% of Jews report attending services once or more per month.

What is this faith of ours all about? This paradox of strength and weakness, this combination package of fact and fiction, faith and myth, wisdom and nonsense, this paradigm of history forever old forever young? What is this faith of ours? What is it all about? And what is, most especially, this favorite brand of ours, the one we call Reform?

And there's the rub. Most of our members were not born into Reform. I was not. My wife was. Many of you were. But the majority of our members were not. They came to us somewhere along the way, and for a wide variety of reasons: conviction, neighborhood, children, spouse or friends. Proud, defiant, searching, yearning, or ashamed they came to us. But mostly they came to us with somebody else's picture of Reform.

How forcefully was this brought home to me a few years ago. Several people told me of their shock at hearing the shofar sounded on Shabbat. They said to me, "Don't

you know you are not supposed to blow the shofar when Rosh Hashanah falls on Shabbat? It's against Jewish law."

Well, I don't know that we are not supposed to blow the shofar when Rosh Hashanah falls on the Shabbat. I know that traditional Jews do not do it, but I also know the reason why.

They were afraid that the one who sounds the shofar, the Ba-al T'kiah might inadvertently carry the shofar from a private place into a public place, and thus violate the law against carrying things on the Sabbath.

There is absolutely no law, anywhere, against sounding the shofar when Rosh Hashanah falls on the Shabbat. It was the carrying of it that was prohibited.

Later on, when they invented the second day of Rosh Hashanah, which by calendar arrangement may not fall on the Sabbath, they transferred the sounding of the shofar to the second day, if the first day fell on the Shabbat.

We who follow the original Biblical calendar of one day for Rosh Hashanah, and we who have no prohibition against carrying objects on the Sabbath, we have every right to hear the shofar sound, and on the proper day, in spite of what the "somebody elses" have to say.

The world is filled with so many "somebody elses." And when we search to learn the real meaning of Reform these "somebody elses" are always there, ready, anxious and happy to lend a helping hand.

I love my fellow Jews in every branch of Judaism that there is. I love them all, and I will turn to them to learn from them precisely what their faith means to them. But I will not have them tell me what my faith is all about.

Reform is not some weakened version of our faith. Reform was never meant to water down. Only to wash clean. And that is not the same. To scrape the barnacles from the hull of a ship is not to sink the ship. Only to preserve the body to help it move more smoothly again.

We need only look about us at the men and women who are the most active in the very values we espouse. In the area of good government, social action, social welfare, and reform, support of those in peril, love of Israel, care for the needy. You name it. We have it - in proud and growing numbers and from the ranks of Reform Judaism.

From the very roster of this Congregation you can see the names of men and women active in every noble project that there is. Government, charity, justice, welfare, education, health. If every member of our Temple, if everyone of you were to list the three or four activities in which you are most involved, that list would cover just

about every worthy endeavor that there is or ought to be. That is the impact of our faith. But, something is getting lost.

So often from our ranks have come those men and women doing all the things they do, and nobly so. And yet it seems so many of them have somehow walked away, away from the faith that gave birth to the values. They keep the values, and forget the faith.

They take the goal without the reason, the heritage without the history. They take the bottom line of Judaism, or what they think to be its bottom line, without the knowledge that sustains it, that brought it into being, that nourishes it along the way. That is when Reform became deformed, and by the very ones who ought to know it better, and who ought to love it best.

Messengers with half a message, and with no return address. Heirs apparent who have set aside or cast aside the core of their inheritance, and that is the saddest part of all. You know the words they say, and how they say it.

“I’m not religious. I’m Reform” “I don’t know Hebrew, I’m Reform.” “We don’t go to Temple. We’re Reform.”

We walked away from Orthodoxy because ritual without meaning was simply not enough. But values without heritage is also not enough. And faith without sharing is also not enough. And deeds without knowledge is also not enough. For, what happens if, with all your deeds, your house is unattended, and your children undernourished? For they need something more than what you give them. To love their faith they have to share their faith – they have to share their faith with you. Because sharing is really what it is all about.

Some years ago a teenager approached me. He wanted to become an Eagle Scout. He asked if he might usher every Friday night, and thus fulfill one of his requirements. I made arrangements for him to assist our ushers. The boy was conscientious, faithful and dependable. And so indeed was his father. Because every Friday night for one full year, every Friday night without fail, the father drove his son to Temple, dropped him off, returned and picked him up. Without fail, without protest, and without ever once stepping foot inside. In short without sharing. He had no way of knowing what it was that he was doing. He was helping his son become an Eagle Scout. He was not helping his son become a Jew.

Now think a moment and don’t be angry that I ask such questions. I ask them of myself as well as you. And I am neither proud nor happy with my answers. But think a moment. When was the last time in your home that you talked with your family about this faith of ours, or shared your dreams concerning it?

Do we express to those we love the most this faith of ours, that they love it too? Or share with them the knowledge or the learning of it?

One member of our Congregation told me that when he was a child in New York, his father took him every Sabbath morning to a different Synagogue. Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstruction, Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Hassidic. He came to learn the greatness of this faith, not just because he went from place to place, but because he shared it with the one he loved.

This faith of ours is strong, and great, and good. We have been around four thousand years. And it is neither boastful nor untrue to say this faith of ours has made a difference.

Less than one half of one percent of the world's population! So small, so tiny, and so weak we should have hidden somewhere in the hills unknown and undiscovered. Instead we carved out and created and handed to the world not pyramids, not parthenons, not gothic columns reaching to the sky. We gave the world ideas, and the world is not the same because of it.

We were the ones who gave the world such concepts as prayer, redemption, Sabbath, universal education, charity, social justice.

We were the ones who related ethics to worship. We were the ones who dared conceive of a moral God.

But this faith of ours will wither on the vine unless we nourish it with knowledge and with love. There never was a Hitler who could kill it. That, only we can do.

Or make it live. By knowing what it is, and loving it, and sharing it with those whose heritage it is or ought to be.

Until Judaism appeared upon the scene, worship was a simple matter. You did what the high priest told you to do. You served your gods with offerings and with gifts. It was a thing to do, perform, act out, and move away. But there was no connection, none at all, between the service of God and living a decent life. We were the ones who put it all together.

It hath been told what is good.  
And what the Lord requires  
Only to do justly and to love mercy, and to walk  
Humbly with God.

Surely you and I would say the same. As Rabbi, I would wish that every member would attend our every service. Of course, I would. But if I had to choose between the one who daily prayed his prayers and the one who lived a decent, value-laden life, I know whom I would choose, and walk thereby a little of the way with Micah.

This is our Secret and only we are brave enough to say it aloud:

What we do in this sanctuary is preparation for worship. Worship, real worship, is what we do with our lives in between visits to this sanctuary.

Why then come here? Not as an end in itself, not as a ritual that has to be performed, a deed that must be done. Not at all. But rather as a way of rekindling the flame, recharging the battery, renewing an affirmation toward a set of values and ideals.

You say to me “Oh, I don’t have to come to Temple to pray. I can pray in the kitchen.” Of course you can. Only you don’t. And I know why. Because the kitchen is a crazy place for prayer! It is a place for cooking, a place of pots and pans and blenders, and who finds quiet there?

You say to me, “Oh, I can walk in the woods at night and pray.” Well, these days, if you walk in the woods at night, you had better pray!

So we gather together and we set aside a few moments in the week. And we clothe these moments with beautiful music and lovely words to set the mood. And why?

To think about our lives against a measuring rod of worth, against the backdrop of ideals; to say the words affirming those ideals out loud for all to hear, and for a little while to glimpse the world our world could be.

Every room here has a reason and every project has a purpose. But here in this sanctuary is the heart-beat of it all. Take this room away, and all the other rooms would wither, the projects crumble, and the building becomes an empty shell, a museum of matters that no longer matter, a place of hired Kaddish-sayers, a façade, a make-believe.

It was after my Dad’s funeral in Baltimore as I drove through the gates of the cemetery I saw a sight I had not seen before. On the sidewalk stood several elderly gentlemen, bearded, and black hatted, and black robed. They stood there waving with prayer books in their hands, for all the world like vendors in a Middle Eastern bazaar.

One came to my car and offered to recite my prayers for me. I told him that I had my own book, and I could pray my own prayers. He stared at me (no beard, no hat, no robe) and I knew that in his heart of hearts he thought, “Look who’s saying prayers!” It was a very sad moment in my life. I did not disdain him. Rather I felt like weeping, weeping for those who have moved so far away from the flame that they must hire a man to pray their prayers for them. Is this the thing that we call worship that keeps our faith alive?

The mourner is asked, “Shall I say Kaddish for your loved one for a year?” The financial arrangement is agreed upon, and the mourner returns home comforted (?) in the knowledge that his loved one will be remembered by someone who knew him

not, that his loved one will be prayed for by a stranger for a fee, a hired Kaddish-sayer, in surrogate sadness. Is this the thing that we call worship that keeps our faith alive? Is this what happens in Temple you support?

Worship! It is no prayer that someone else can pray for us, no dream that someone else can dream. Worship is reaching up and reaching out. Because our lives are more than breathing in and breathing out, more than earning what we call a living, more than a search for games to play, more even than the struggle to survive.

Our lives are sacred, and there is a need to plumb that sanctity, a need to search it out! A need to find our way with those who share the dream.

We need each other, and we need us here. Here to strengthen one another and ourselves. Not in mystery or in magic or in fear. But with a yearning that will not be denied.

We are the keepers of the flame.

Create in us a clean heart, O Lord, and renew that steadfast spirit within us. Then will the Book of Life be open for us, and it won't be filled with scribbles. Amen.