

# A Plausible Faith in an Uncertain World

## Yom Kippur Dvar 5771

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By Rabbi Maurice Harris

A few years ago, a family I was working with had a tragedy happen – a sudden and shocking loss. In the weeks following their calamity, I met with them several times. On one of those occasions, the mother of the family – I’ll call her Miriam – told me that she didn’t know what she believed in anymore. She certainly didn’t know if she believed there was a God anymore. She had been pushed past her breaking point, and there was no world-organizing system, no master narrative that she could put these events into so that her life still made sense. Miriam was exhausted and despairing over her ability to cope. I had never been through a loss like hers, and I wasn’t really sure what to tell her. To get some advice, I called a rabbinic colleague, Rabbi Rosalind Glazer, and told her I wasn’t sure how to address this person’s crisis of faith.

Rabbi Glazer responded by sharing something she had learned as a hospital chaplain. She said, “When people have just lost their anchor and don't know what they're certain about anymore, sometimes it can help to ask them to look inward and identify what they still *do* believe in, whatever it might be.”

I went back to visit a few days later, and Miriam again said that she felt completely lost in the world, and didn’t know if she believed in God or any kind of higher meaning in the universe, whatever anyone might call it. I reassured her that I wasn’t judging her in any way, and then said, “Listen, would you be willing to try to tell me something that you *do* believe in right now? It can be anything.” “What do you mean?” she asked. I said, “Something that you do believe in, however basic it might be.” She stopped crying for a moment and sat back in thought. Then she said, “I believe that other people care. There are other people who care.”

It was then that I felt I knew what to say next. “What if you try holding on to *that*, trusting in *that*? We live in a world where a lot of things are uncertain, where terrible things sometimes happen in a flash. And it’s a world in which other people care.” I left that day with the feeling that this helped a little. How much I don’t know, but I was so grateful to Rabbi Glazer.

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Sometimes in my work I learn important lessons from teachers in other religious traditions, and I’d like to share one of those teachings I came across recently. In his 2002 book, *Reading the Bible Again for the First Time: Taking the Bible Seriously but Not Literally*, the Christian theologian Marcus Borg writes that for him, faith is not the assertion of doctrines that are hard to believe. Rather, he says that faith involves coming to believe and trust in things that are reasonable to believe, things that can be tested out through human experience. Within his

Christian tradition, Rev. Borg is a controversial figure because he's the kind of theologian who will say things like he's not sure whether he believes in the Christian doctrine of the resurrection, but he *does* believe in the transformative power of the *meaning* of that mythic story – that love is a greater power than death. (Incidentally, Judaism has its own version of that teaching in the Biblical Book of the Song of Songs, *shir ha-shirim*).

Faith, according to Rev. Borg, is a lot like the other intangibles of life that we can't measure materially, but that we know from experience are real – things like love, loyalty, and friendship. Faith is textured, intuitive, and testable in daily human life. For Rev. Borg, religious life can help us cultivate faith not so much through the literal reading of the stories of our religious traditions, but rather through opening ourselves to discovering the deeper meanings about life and the nature of Reality that religious stories are trying to express through the spiritual art form of myth. Both Christianity and Judaism present us with stories that teach that love really is a stronger power than death, and if we examine the nature of life, we can probe and test that proposition. Yes, death ends a human life, but the love connected to the person who has died carries on, and the goodness that emanates from the love the deceased shared carries on as well.

Whatever you think of Rev. Borg's non-literalist approach to his own religion's traditional doctrines, his writing [small pause] and the experience I had counseling Miriam have led me to wonder: What do we really believe in? And what kind of faith can we cultivate in a contemporary, liberal Jewish setting?

Broadly speaking, this is a Jewish community that carries some ambivalence and uncertainty about how Judaism fits in our lives. I realize that we're a diverse group and of course on a person-by-person basis what I've just said is not the case. There are some members of this Jewish community who have cultivated an ever-deepening Jewish faith through increased traditional observance, study, mystical exploration, and prayer. There are also some in the community who have made a serious place for Judaism in their lives in less traditional ways, through study, culture, cuisine, art, or experimental new forms of Jewish observance. As a rabbi, I am inspired by the people in our community who have found joy and meaning in making these various forms of "Jewishing" a central part of their lives, and I deeply appreciate the energy and leadership they provide.

And, I think the people who would see themselves in this way would readily agree that they're a minority of the demographic group I'll call "Jews and non-Jewish members of the Jewish community who come to High Holy Days at liberal synagogues in the Pacific Northwest." Oy, what a terrible acronym that would make. In any event, I've been preoccupied for several weeks now with how this group, in a generalized way, would answer the questions, "What do you really believe in? And what are you uncertain about?"

I didn't conduct a survey, so my own attempts to answer those questions are based on my observations. In exploring these questions, I thought it might help to start cataloging the things that we're *not sure* we believe. Why don't we start with the elephant in the room? Even though

this is the most solemn Jewish day of the year and we're here in *shul*, most of us – for sure not all – but most of us are pretty uncertain about the role of organized religion in our lives, Judaism included. And with notable exceptions, we're uncertain to fairly skeptical about many of the traditional beliefs of Judaism, such as: God revealed the Torah to Moses at Mt. Sinai amidst terrible thunder and smoke; God split the Sea for the Israelites when they fled Pharaoh; Senator Joe Lieberman really *is* a Democrat – you know, the *traditional* Jewish beliefs. Many of us are also uncertain about what it means to be Jewish, though we are *here* for Kol Nidre, and that tells me that even the more ambivalent among us sense that there's something of value in being Jewish – or at minimum, something that deserves respect.

A group like this also harbors many uncertainties about our connections to other parts of the Jewish people. In a liberal Jewish community, there's uncertainty about how we relate to the Orthodox. And there's uncertainty about our relationship to Israel, which Rabbi Yitzhak insightfully discussed on Rosh Hashanah. On the whole, people in this Jewish community are grateful that Israel exists, but disappointed that there isn't peace yet, and conflicted about how to judge the ongoing conflict or engage in conversation with friends who ask uncomfortable questions.

When it comes to spirituality and the meaning of life, my sense is that we are a group of people who *want* meaning in life. We want a connection with some kind of Higher Power, and we want to have a spiritual life that gives us more serenity, more comfort in our place in the universe, and more existential certainty in the face of the mysteries of death and loss. But, many of us are uncertain that *the synagogue* is a place that can help us with those spiritual yearnings.

This is a lot of uncertainty to cope with. Does anybody have a Xanax – I feel like I'm about to have an anxiety attack. Just kidding. It's not surprising that we live amidst all this uncertainty. The world has never changed at such a fast pace before in all of human history. That kind of change shatters worldviews that for centuries have helped people organize the sense of meaning in their lives and understand their place in the universe. Amidst this existential chaos, this vacuum of social consensus about what constitutes our framework of meaning, many people seek new solid ground, new certainty in different ways.

Some turn to fundamentalism or rigid ideologies. Some turn to gurus. Some, and I include myself in this group, turn to approaches to religion that seek to identify traditional wisdom and combine it with creative new ideas, relying on instinct and feedback from others to point them towards truth. Some people avoid the issue entirely and dive into work, family, or less noble pursuits, like Facebook.

I have no crystal ball and can't offer you any predictions about whether this chaotic historical moment is a prelude to the end of the world or the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. All I can tell you is that I still love the one-frame cartoon that I quoted from this pulpit several years ago. It's a picture of a raggedy man with a dirty beard standing on a busy New York street corner holding a sign that reads, "The world is not going to end. We will have to learn to cope."

So we're here, trying to cope in this morass of uncertainty. As I was thinking about all of this, I started to wonder whether the exercise that Rabbi Glazer had suggested to me in my counseling of Miriam might help us as a group figure out how to build the foundations of what I'll call for the moment, **a plausible faith in a desperately uncertain world**. I've already discussed the things we're uncertain about. So now it's time to ask: What do we – this liberal Jewish sub-group of 21<sup>st</sup> Century West Coast Americans – actually believe in? What are we *certain* about? Before I answer, let me say again, please pardon the limitations of these generalizations. To those here tonight who are more firmly rooted on a Jewish path, as I continue I invite you to consider your place within this more uncertain demographic group, and to consider the important things you have to offer this large part of the Jewish community.

Now to return to the question. With our demographic, here's what I see: We're certain that we love our kids. We're certain that justice is worth fighting for. We're certain that it's good for people to have religious freedom and freedom of speech. We're certain that we're lucky to live in this country. We're certain that none of us will live forever. We're certain that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. We're certain that life inevitably contains joy and suffering, and, as Miriam said, that other people care. And we're certain that Judaism matters, though we lack anything resembling consensus on where it fits in our shared framework of meaning.

I'm sure that I could go on, but even if I stop here, I am wondering if this list is enough to begin to build a foundation for a faith that can work for us. What I see as I consider this list is that, even though the collective belief in traditional myths has blown apart in modern times, the *indecision* we have about religion hasn't stripped us of our certainty about the importance of having loving and just human relations. Thank God.

Still, our certainties are not enough to give us the kind of meaning that I think most of us crave deep within. Our certainties help us insist on an approach to life that is compassionate and humanistic, but I believe that we are a species that is *hard-wired for mythic meaning*, and that we suffer when we have no mythic anchors. This is where I hope I have something of value to suggest regarding our shared experience of uncertainty.

I want to ask you to consider that Jewish life – whether approached more traditionally or more experimentally – offers a framework of meaning that is rich enough mythically to satisfy the longing of the human spirit, and yet open-minded and inquisitive enough to make room for the unprecedented flow of information, scientific discovery, and cross-cultural exposure that our internet-era society creates for us. I'm not talking about fundamentalist or intolerant expressions of Judaism here – these are some of the dangers that come with the religious territory. I'm talking about the Judaism that tells the story of a small and enslaved people who were liberated from a cruel fate, and then took their newfound freedom as a mandate to extend the principles of human dignity and social justice to all. That's our mythic story, and our God is the God who urges us to stand up to tyrants, to seek justice and pursue it. Our God proclaims that every human being is a reflection of God Godself, and that love is stronger than cruelty.

I don't know if Moses really threw down his rod at Pharaoh's feet and had it magically turn into a snake, but I do know that before freedom can burst forth, somebody has to have had enough, and has to have the courage to risk his or her neck, walk up to the people in power, and throw down their rod in protest, even if it gets them killed. I don't know if there really were 10 plagues that decimated Egypt, but I do know that societies that oppress people start to plague themselves in horrible ways. I don't know if the Red Sea really split, but I do know that every birth represents new hope and possibility, and the Hebrews marching between those narrow walls of water to safety, accompanied by the singing and dancing of the Israelite women, is as vivid a mythic birth image as you'll ever find. I have a Marcus Borg-style faith that there's something in the Divine will that wants the circle of freedom to keep expanding until it includes everyone. Judaism helps ground me and gives me a framework of meaning in this way.

We live in a transitional era, and we're stuck with its uncertainty. We have unparalleled personal freedom to seek out our own frameworks for meaning, our own spiritual communities, but with that freedom comes the ungrounded-ness of a clutter of competing world views and an ever changing social scene. I want to say to you tonight that in the midst of that uncertainty, contemporary Judaism has something valuable to offer. If you're missing out on Judaism, you're missing out on something special.

And this community, Temple Beth Israel, *this* is a place where you can experience it. Here, in our Shabbat services and our adult ed classes, in our movie screenings, cultural events, and panel discussions, in our religious school and in our holiday celebrations, we seek that missing higher meaning together. We explore the teachings of a 3,500 year old tradition that balances the tribal and the universal that welcomes questions and celebrates multiple perspectives.

There are lots of meaning-making systems out there that work. Twelve-step? It works. Contemporary Buddhism? Works. So does Judaism, but it only works if people participate in community. It definitely won't magically stick around and flourish if people don't value it and support it.

"Aha!" I hear some of you thinking. "I knew the rabbi would ask us for money! I shoulda known..." That's okay, because right next to the people thinking that there are some other people thinking, "Well, at least this year he didn't talk about politics." Seriously, this sermon is not about money. It's about meaning. There's meaning available *here* ... in a world starving for meaning. It's available here – not in the form of pat answers and dogma that will put an end to all your doubts if you just tell yourself to believe A, B, and C. The meaning that's available here is something we seek here together, as a Jewish community of the uncertain.

What I ask for is for you to value that meaning, by exploring Judaism, by participating in Jewish community, and by supporting it with your hard-earned money and your precious time, because you believe there's something of value here. It's your judgment call, your choice. If you decide it's not so important, this [gesture to the room] really will go away.

There's a book by Nick Fiedler about re-examining one's religion from a vantage point of modern uncertainty, and it's called *The Hopeful Skeptic*. I love the title. I know that skepticism and uncertainty are here to stay for a while, but how we respond to the times we live in is up to us. I don't know how this unstable era in the history of religious and mythic understanding is going to shake out. I suspect that the most rigid and intolerant ideologies won't end up winning the day, though they might do a lot of damage before they prove themselves bankrupt. I also don't believe that the claim that humanity has no use for the mythic and the spiritual will win the day either.

Despite our collective skepticism, I think we can approach the dilemma of how to cope with our shared uncertainty with hope. On this Yom Kippur, a day that we dedicate to changing ourselves for the better, I ask you to spend some time talking with the people closest to you and sharing with each other the answer to the question, "What do I *really* believe in?," and I hope you are empowered by the answers you discover. I also ask you to honor your doubts and your deepest questions, in keeping with the Jewish tradition of sacred questioning. There is nothing wrong with doubts. Any belief that is really just a repeated denial of a doubt is a belief standing on shaky legs. Doubts are invitations to explore a profound question with depth and honesty.

Finally, I ask you to consider bringing that whole bundle of beliefs, questions and doubts into *this* Jewish community, and to consider Temple Beth Israel to be a center for Jewish life where you can dialogue about your beliefs and doubts freely, and where you can test out the growing edges of belief within the warmth of Jewish community.

*G'mar hatimah tovah* – may we all be sealed for a good year.