

Rosh Hashana 5774

When I come to shul must I leave my conscience at home?

For the Rosh Hashana Journal I submitted an article, when I come to shul must I leave my intelligence at home? As we gather over the Yamim Norayim do I have to suspend all I know about the antiquity of the universe, big bang, evolution and DNA to accept an omnipotent creating divinity and a world less than 6,000 years old?

Today I pose a similar and vexing question. When I come to shul on Rosh Hashana, do I have to leave my moral conscience at home?

The question was foisted upon me over the last couple of weeks after I appeared on ABC and SBS television on programs dealing with sexuality and religion. It was a coincidence that they were both aired within a week. They were filmed weeks apart. On ABC I was discussing Tony Kushner's play "Angels in America". On SBS I was part of the Insight audience being quizzed directly on same sex marriage. As you may know I felt impelled to make a statement to the effect that in the context of 2013 Australia with the values our country espouses, I believe it discriminatory to deny same-sex couples equality in civil marriage.

I was taken by two comments my own remarks had drawn.

The first was an email to my mother. "Dear Yvonne, Imagine our surprise to turn on the television last week and see Jeremy discussing the play Angels in America. He was in the middle of the stage surrounded by homosexuals but he looked alright!"

I have no doubt that it was meant innocently, but the words jarred. Why should I not look alright? Should I have looked frightened or horrified at the thought of my company?

The second comment was of a different genre. It read,

"I am, frankly, astonished that the rabbi of the most prestigious Orthodox synagogue in Sydney should be so self-indulgent as to present his own personal predilections in an issue as serious as this rather than the Torah viewpoint (both for us and the world)..."

"Very dangerous territory ... Can one hold views such as this and still be an Orthodox Rabbi?"

It was refreshing to know that we are still 'the most prestigious synagogue in Sydney'.

There are two assumptions that are made in this e-mail. The first is that thinking for myself is inconsistent with Orthodoxy. The second is that expressing my personal thoughts is inconsistent with rabbinic leadership.

So by what right do I stand before you today?

When I come to shul are my personal passions and compassions an obstacle to my Judaism? When I come to shul on Rosh Hashana must I leave my conscience at home?

It is a broad but fundamental question. It's not just about sexuality – nor is it just about religiosity.

On the face of it, our question touches the political question of party and principle. And there; from climate change through abortion and embryonic research, through national versus constituent priorities, members and candidates must choose whether to speak their minds.

But mine is a deeper question than parliamentary and party responsibility. It is about *my* belief and what I am allowed to believe. It is about *my* belief and the ability to express my belief when my very essence is as a purveyor of belief.

There is no question that as an Orthodox Jew I follow the word of God. And I encourage you all to do the same. But nonetheless, sometimes I wrestle with the word of God. Does it make me less of a Rabbi?

And dare I say it – despite the occasional hostile email – I encourage you to do the same.

And I do it in God's name.

Today as we stand before God. Even as we acknowledge God as our Creator. Even as we are contrite and prayerful... When we come to shul do we leave our consciences at home?

On the face of it, Judaism endorses a blind faith in the goodness of God approach. The Torah reading today has God tell Abraham to listen to his wife Sarah and throw Ishmael and Hagar out from the family home. Tomorrow's reading is even more startling. God tells Abraham to take his son Isaac to offer him on a distant mountain. On the verse *Vayashkem Avraham Baboker* – Abraham got up early in the morning – the commentaries confirm, so keen was Abraham to perform God's instruction that he rose early and even saddled his own donkey. This is presented as the model of unquestioning devotion.

Is Abraham's message really that we are supposed to be unthinking God following automatons? Is that the Jewish way?

Of course we know that's nonsense. When it came to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in the chapters just before our Yom Tov reading God invites Abraham's opinion. Abraham haggles with God over the number of innocent people that should enable the whole community to be spared. Abraham challenges God on the basis of personal moral conviction. "Should not the judge of all the earth act with tzedek – with righteousness?"

A closer look at today's Torah reading sees Abraham distressed until God assures him that He himself will care for the welfare of Ishmael and Hagar. And here too, *Vayashkem Avraham baboker*, Abraham gets up early and provides them with sustenance.

While the text of the binding of Isaac does have Abraham follow God's instruction without question, one school of Rabbis struggle to explain this as an exceptional response to God's clear, direct and personal command. Yet another school is so troubled by the concept of Abraham's silence that within the Midrash – a text around 1700 years old, they construct a dialogue of prevarication. Just as Abraham challenged God over Sodom and Gemorrah he balks at the instruction to take Isaac for sacrifice.

Compassion is a great virtue. It is such a great virtue that the Rabbis of antiquity could not let Abraham stay silent in the face of perceived injustice. They had to rectify the misperception by scripting a dialogue. Moreover, even within the Torah account when Abraham challenges God he makes a clear and significant point. "How will you be perceived?"

The biblical God is tough and exacting. Often we cannot fathom His ways. We are created by God in God's image and not vice versa. However we are expected to emulate the divine values with which we are endowed. Compassion and understanding and a love of humanity rank high on this list.

I am not Abraham. He lived over 3,500 years ago when God struck up personal conversations with pious nomads. He also lived before the Torah had been given to Moses.

Moses we know argued with God. Immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments on Sinai the people turned to idolatry and made the Golden Calf. God wanted to destroy them. Moses' pleading had God reveal himself as *Hashem, Hashem, Kel Rachum veChanun, Erech apayim ve-rav chessed ve-emet* – thirteen attributes we shall repeat many times over the next ten days – The Lord God, merciful, compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in kindness and truth...

Just before Moses' death the Midrash has God lament, "Who now will stand against Me on the day of wrath? Who shall protect Israel in the house of My anger? Who will stand up for My children in the great end of days? And who will speak up for them when they sin?"

Our sages simply could not countenance a God who was blind to injustice, uncaring about the way He was represented by His faithful and deaf to entreaty. The Midrash is rabbinic fable to address lacunae and inconsistencies in the text. Through the Midrash we learn that our sages believe an unfeeling God, or a God who lacks in compassion, is a gaping hole that cries out to be filled.

How do I know if I, too, am allowed an opinion? Perhaps Abraham or Moses knew when to demand that God be compassionate; but I don't have their spiritual credentials or discernment.

The great first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, Rav Abraham Isaac Kook wrote about the tension between Jewish and secular imperatives. He taught:

The fear of Heaven must not suppress man's natural morality, for then the fear of Heaven is no longer pure. Pristine fear of Heaven is evident when the natural morality, rooted in man's upright nature, is enhanced to a greater degree than it would be without such fear.

Rav Kook's purpose is to identify the higher spirituality – *Yirat Shamayim* – in its purest and pristine sense. To be truly God-fearing, he explains, we must be able to build our reverence for the Almighty as a discrete edifice upon man's natural morality. But note with care the language of his opening: The fear of Heaven must not *suppress* man's natural morality. Man's natural morality is an imperative. It is an essential ingredient. We cannot be Godly if we follow the commandments but remain moral vacuums.

My natural morality finds discrimination repugnant. My natural morality cherishes relationships that stabilise people within society, that create enduring bonds, engender security and celebrate the beauty of love. We are enjoined to use all our faculties to come close to God. Our sense of right, our sense of wrong, our sense of outrage our passion and our compassion are all instruments in the symphony of our service.

There's a substantial debate with our greatest modern religious philosophers such as Yesheyahu Leibowitz demanding that we act because God says so and not because morality dictates. It is his view that imagining that the authority of the Torah stems from moral considerations is an atheistic and idolatrous concept. Rabbi JB Soloveitchik in *Halachic man* similarly establishes the Halachic imperative rather than our approval as the basis of our obligation. Nonetheless, From the medieval writings of Rav Saadia Gaon through to modern orthodox giants like Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits and Jonathan Sacks is a reverence for reason and a belief that it is incumbent upon us to seek to identify what is right.

It's all very easy when what we want and what God wants coincide. We can spar on the relative merits of helping the needy or refraining from wanton violence because it is obviously the correct course of action... or if there is greater merit in living such a life as an obedient servant of a commanding God.

But how to conduct ourselves when there is a gulf? If God and I don't see eye to eye does that make me inherently flawed, defective or evil? Should I be embarrassed of my independent perspective?

The Talmud presents the following argument. It's set in the era after the destruction of the Temple and around the time of the Bar Kochba rebellion. We're about 130 CE.

The Roman governor of Judea Turnus Rufus challenged Rabbi Akiva.

"If your God loves the poor, why does he not support them?" Rabbi Akiva responded that our charitable intervention for their welfare brings us closer to God and is to our merit. On the contrary, argued Turnus Rufus – let me share with you a parable.

Imagine, said Turnus Rufus, that an earthly king was angry with his servant and put him in prison ordering that he be denied all food and water. What if someone disobeyed the king and gave him food and drink. When the king heard of the disloyalty, wouldn't he be angry? Continuing his parable, Turnus Rufus admonished Rabbi Akiva – Israel claims to be God's servant. Now in exile must you not accept the judgement of poverty and starvation as God's will.

Rabbi Akiva replied with a parable of his own.

Suppose an earthly king was angry with his son and put him in prison ordering that he be denied all food and water. What if someone disobeyed the king and before the prince starved to death he gave him food and drink? When the King comes to learn of it, won't he ultimately give him a reward?

Says Rabbi Akiva we are called 'sons of God'. The king may be angry but he does not really want us to neglect His children.

Rosh Hashana is a celebration of God as Avinu Malkeinu - Our Father, Our King.

The prayers are about His dominion. The Shofar is a fanfare proclaiming his sovereignty. We are His subjects but we are also, all of us, His children.

God does not want us to starve. Nor does he want us to let others starve. God does not want us to ignore that inner voice that calls for life for the endangered, for sustenance for the starving, provender for the needy and a haven the persecuted and a welcoming community for the lonely and the alienated.

What does God want of us? But to heal the ailing, help the needy, feed the hungry and to love our neighbour as we love ourself.

Indeed, we must love ourself. We must see our value. Not to the extent of idolatrous narcissism. But we cannot love our neighbour as ourself if we have no self-worth or low self-esteem.

If our shofar blasts are interpreted as celebrating a God who would let his children suffer then we are not listening to the shofar blasts that are a call for our action. We are hearing the noise and missing the alarm.

God has given us no greater or more potent gift than our minds. Unfettered, unchanneled, unregulated that brain can be an instrument of great harm. But inspired and informed and infused with love, it is our ally in perfecting God's world. We should not be ashamed to think. We should not be ashamed to cry out. When we become troubled at the suffering of others we should be ashamed to remain silent.

If I come to shul and I leave my conscience at home then it isn't me standing before God. It would be an empty shell – and you, my friends deserve better.

Many people don't come to shul any more. They don't engage in religion. They find it alienating or oppressive or irrelevant. They find the observance antiquated. They find the stories infantile. Religious fundamentalism drives out the godliness. We listen to the fanatics and our hairs bristle. I don't want to worship that person's idea of God.

We deserve better. Religion can be embracing, liberating and instructive. The rituals and observances can guide us, inform our lives, connect us with our heritage and strengthen our communities. The stories can challenge us to think more, to consider and reconsider our approaches. Such has always been the message of the greatest of our sages. If only we really knew how to read.

An important caveat, of course, is that creating God in our own image is somewhere between folly and idolatry or heresy. I don't for a moment suggest that you should worship my idea of God or create your own personal divinity. Our Scriptures and our prayers talk of God who was, is and will be. Who came before and will endure beyond. God is the creator and we are the created. However God has called upon us to be close to Him. And God's idea of God is that within His strict justice and codes for living there is a responsibility that we engage. With all our heart, with all our soul and with our minds.

Of course we must throw ourselves into the mitzvot.

Front and centre are the mitzvot of knowing God.

When he spoke here a couple of weeks ago, Rabbi Dr David Pelcovitz, a psychologist and scholar of international repute spoke of some tragic research. He said that people were given three babies to hold – babies just a few months old. If one of them had a mother suffering from a postpartum depression simply holding that baby for 5 minutes would leave you, who held it somewhat depressed yourself for a couple of hours after. Simply from holding that baby.

The babies from happy mothers engage and smile. They interact. The babies whose mothers are seriously depressed become disengaged and remote. When you pick them up for just a few minutes you might not immediately discern the anomaly. But the intangible alienation rubs off on your psyche and leaves you feeling down.

Far too many human beings have been allowed to feel that God, our shared parent doesn't love or embrace them. And that alienation is passed forwards to those with whom they interact. God and religion are misrepresented in society. It is time to rehabilitate them both... not because God needs it – but because like a warm parental hug, they make our community, our society and our world better and happier places.

Bless you was once "God Bless you." Goodbye was "God be with you". Once upon a time we invoked God's love and compassion at every sneeze and every parting. We spoke as if God cared. We spoke as if God mattered. God was a part of our lives.

Let us bring God back.

If we follow the siddur we should say 100 Brachot every day through our prayers and our blessings before and after food. If we think about the words of the blessing we thank God for provision and sustenance.

But even in our conversation and even through our daily acts of kindness we can draw people closer as we fulfil the commandments to love the stranger, love our neighbour, to love ourselves and love our God.

And just as we write a loving God back into our daily lives, may God with reciprocal compassion write us and all our families in the Book of Life.

A Shana Tova. A year of happiness and health.