

כל נדררי Kol Nidre 5777 – Rabbi Paul Drazen

I believe, we all believe. Don't we? Of course we believe. If not, why would we have come to services tonight? Of course we believe. Perhaps a better question to ask is "what do we believe in?" That's more to the point.

It's more to the point and infinitely more difficult to answer. We've all heard, many, many times, that Judaism is basically a religion of action, not fundamentally a religion of faith. We believe, but what to believe is rarely stressed in lessons. We don't have a catechism or credo like other religions. Perhaps it would be easier if we did have a list of what we were supposed to believe; at least we'd know.

But we do have lists of beliefs, written over the centuries. Yigdal, tonight's final prayer, the prayer which typically ends Friday night services, is based on Maimonides' 13 principles of faith. We're lucky we sing it, since if we took a serious look at it, we might discover we have a hard time with many of those beliefs. After all, we might not subscribe to all of them and that would make it difficult to sing about it. But that's not the only prayer on this holiday which speaks about what we believe.

On the days of Rosh Hashanah and again tomorrow morning we recite the piyyut *V'khol Ma'aminim*. It lists various beliefs we hold about God. There is the poem *L'brit Habate* which describes, in beautiful images, descriptions of God and the ways God controls our lives. Like the helmsman of a boat, as a potter fashions the clay. Beautiful images, but do we really believe them?

Ultimately we need not, certainly not literally. We are quite free to determine the kind of God in which we believe. But our freedom is our problem. Our beliefs are not set in stone; they are hardly set in sand. We have options. But that's not really tonight's question. We need not ask tonight if we believe in God, but do we realize that *God believes in us?*

It's not as strange as it sounds. Yom Kippur is a celebration of **mutual** belief. How so? We come and praise God, and ask God for forgiveness. Those are signs of belief. We believe, as well, that God will forgive us. Forgiveness is a symbol of God's belief in us.

God believes in us. God believes that we can take our lives and make them better. God believes that we are not destined to live in sin all our lives. God believes that we can, with effort and willingness, turn ourselves around. God believes in us and will free us from our sins, if we will only free ourselves.

God's belief in us is demonstrated in so many ways. If you have the ability to digest pages and pages of numbers and use the information to grow a business or benefit people, it shows God believes in you. If you can take material and thread and create clothes, it shows God believes in you. If you can lift an instrument and make music, it shows God believes in us. When we take words and use them to inspire, cajole or disturb, it shows God believes in us. When we make a sad person happy, calm a fear, teach a lesson, guide a dream, it shows God believes in us.

Those seem like simple things, especially if we are able to do them. But these are talents which do not come easy to everyone. When we have those talents and take them for granted, abuse them or let them atrophy, we betray God's belief in us.

So we believe in God. *God believes in us.* There is, however, one question left for tonight, *do we believe in ourselves?* I am tempted to say we don't. How does the Kol Nidre service on this evening begin? Not with a joyful noise. It starts with drama as we remove the Torah scrolls from the ark and say we are permitted to pray with sinners.

Then we recite the Kol Nidre, a formula in which we ask to be forgiven for unfulfilled vows. That shows real faith in ourselves, to begin the holiest day of the year by acknowledging that we're not doing very well. But are those actions and statements a lack of faith in ourselves or are they simply recognizing reality?

The answer to that question depends on us. If we believe in ourselves, Kol Nidre is at worst, an acceptance of reality. We know we're not perfect, that is a human state of affairs. But we know, as well, that does not mean we are unable to improve. If we couldn't improve, there would be no purpose to Yom Kippur at all.

But even if we say the words, we still might not believe in ourselves. When we give up on our dreams too easily, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*. When we set our goals too low, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*. When we don't begin a project because we aren't sure we will be able to complete it, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*.

When we are not ready to try something new and different because it's not the way we've always done it, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*. When we are not ready to try something because we tried that once, years ago, and it did not work, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*.

When we say as a community, "well we're just Syracuse," *we show we don't believe in ourselves*. When we fail to take the lead in a project or idea, when we are content to wait to see what others will do, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*. When we sit and wait and do nothing, *we show we don't believe in ourselves*.

The world has changed around us. Changes come because someone's willing to try and do. Drive over to Shoppingtown. Do you remember when you could shop there? When Destiny was Carousel? There are some changes which succeed. And there are some changes which fail. But we will never know which is which unless we believe in ourselves and try – and, perhaps, succeed!

Things change. Last year at this time I spoke about how things at the start of 5776 of this year were not what I had anticipated. I said "any landing you walk away from is a good landing." From that perspective, it's been an interesting year for me. I've had more than a few bumps along the way, some of them pretty big bumps. But I've continued to push and to work and to try because I believe that it's the not only the only alternative, but it is the best alternative.

That is true for individuals; it is true for congregations too. On the first day of Rosh Hashanah I spoke of where we need to go as a congregation. Some people were heartened by the comments, some agreed fully, others want to think more about them. Of course, not everyone was pleased to hear what I said, or what they thought I said or, worse, the things another person told them that someone who was here were sure they heard me say.

But one point continues. We will, as individuals, as families, as a congregation and as a larger Jewish community, survive only if we believe – if we believe in ourselves, in each other and have faith in God that we can make. It's faith that's the core.

Tonight is a celebration, a celebration of our past, our present and our future. That's why we said *she-he-hiyanu*, the blessing of thanksgiving, when the service began. We are thankful for our chance to make mistakes and to grow. It is not something we take lightly. It is more than a simple saying; it is a matter of belief. It's a matter of three beliefs: our belief in God, God's belief in us and *our belief in ourselves*. When we combine all three, we will have a remarkable new year.