

Yom Kippur 5779
September 19, 2018/10 Tishri 5779
Conversation with God
Rabbi Zari M. Weiss

Hey God,

It's me. I know it's been a while since we've had a real heart-to-heart talk; I'm sorry; it's kind of a busy time. I know You know.

There's been something weighing on my heart that I've wanted to share with You, for some time now. Today's a good day.

Because today we're supposed to stand before You, stripped of all pretense, honestly examine our lives, and consider when and how we have lived up to our better selves, and when and how we have fallen short of what we know we are capable of. And—to reach out to You—for guidance and wisdom and sometimes, when we need it, direction or perhaps, re-direction.

But G-d, before I tell You what's been weighing on my heart, I want to say something: You know how important Judaism has always been in my life. From the time I was a small child, for reasons I could never explain, I have loved being Jewish. Even though I was one of maybe five Jewish kids in my elementary and high school, I never felt bad about not getting to celebrate Christmas; I had Chanukah, and didn't mind being different. I always felt proud when my mother came to my school with potato latkes or *hamantashen* or *matzah* and taught my classmates about Judaism and the Jewish holidays. I loved it when we'd go to visit my grandmother in the Fairfax district of Los Angeles, and we'd go to Kantor's deli for mitzvah ball soup and pastrami sandwiches, and then we'd walk around the neighborhood and see Jewish ritual items in all of the storefronts and there would be Hebrew signs in the windows and Yiddish spoken on the streets. Even though I didn't understand the Hebrew or know much about Judaism at that point in my life, I always felt such a strong connection to it all; I felt filled up, like I belonged to something so much older and bigger than myself. And my love for Judaism only grew stronger as I got older. God, do you remember how--when I turned 16 and got my driver's license--I drove around, by myself, to Friday evening services at different synagogues, until at last I found one that felt like it was the right fit? I started teaching there, and then joined as a 16 year old. My parents joined soon thereafter. Pretty wild for a 16 year old, huh?

And You know, G-d, how, as I grew older, my love for Judaism led me to want to be a rabbi—an idea that was strange to my parents—who never even had the expectation that I would become bat mitzvah, or for that matter, go to college! And how, for these past twenty-seven years, I have indeed worked as a rabbi, in many different settings, many different contexts. You know how I have persisted, even though the work can be hard at times and exhausting, and even though, to be quite honest, it's really *not* in my comfort zone to stand in front of people and be the focus of attention.

I *do* love what I do--being a part of other people's lives at important moments, teaching . . . and am so grateful—even with the challenges—of having been a rabbi all these years. I've done it and continue to do it, G-d, because I truly felt called to serve the Jewish People, and by extension, all of humanity. And to serve You, and what I've discerned over these years that You want of me. Maybe that sounds lofty, G-d, but I don't mean it be; it's just true.

So G-d, I stand here tonight, on Yom Kippur, and this is what is on my heart: I am concerned for the future of the Jewish People and Judaism. And . . . I am not sure that I know how best to serve both my People and You.

The Jewish world that I stepped into when I was ordained in 1991 was such a different world than it is today. It was challenging enough then to be a Reform rabbi—to balance honoring four thousand years of Jewish Tradition with the need and the commitment to make Judaism relevant in the 20th and 21st Centuries. But now, in 2018, it is even more challenging. Yes, I know that Judaism has always changed and evolved—and that’s good and as it *should* be. But, so many parts of Jewish life and practice that were previously simply “givens” are no longer so.

People’s priorities are different today. While personally, I find meaning in Jewish practices and feel most at home in the Jewish community, and know that some others do as well, I try my best to understand and accept, without judgment, that others have different priorities and interests, and those are every bit as valid as well.

I understand, G-d, that many aspects of Jewish Tradition—as they’ve been handed down to us through the centuries, don’t appeal to many, maybe even most, Jews today. A relatively select few do attend and participate in Shabbat and holiday celebrations on a regular basis, but less, I’m afraid, than don’t. There is a lot of pressure from our broader culture to do things on Friday nights and Saturdays. A friend of mine, someone who is very strongly identified as a Jew, told me that it is hard to say no to her teenage son who wants to go to Friday night football games or parties. So many parents I know feel conflicted because soccer is on Saturday mornings. And with our busy schedules Saturdays are often the best time to run errands; it’s difficult to set aside a full day to rest, to pause from our 24/7 world. Even *I* increasingly feel that pull.

I also know, G-d, that Jewish prayer doesn’t work for everyone. I see people’s faces when they sit in the sanctuary: the prayers don’t really speak to or resonate with them; some don’t participate at all—maybe because they feel hypocritical, or perhaps foolish, saying things that they don’t understand or accept as true. It really *is* kind of irrational for us to use language and metaphors such as *Melech HaOlam*, King of the World, that most of us no longer believe in or relate to. I wasn’t born yesterday, you know (oh, I guess You do know!). I recognize that comparatively few people are interested in coming to study the Torah, that—for much of the year, at least—talks about animal sacrifices or wars and conquest of innocent people whom our ancestors considered idolaters—even if some of us *do* find these archaic details interesting or are committed to try to find something of value in the texts. And I know that because we no longer live in ghettos and are free to mingle in the broader world, Jews’ needs for connection and community are now met in many different places and different ways—*not* just in the Jewish community. I get it, G-d; I really do.

The truth is G-d, I feel that I spend so much of my time trying to “promote” Judaism to others. I’m always trying to get people to “join” our community and participate more because I know the value of doing so; sometimes, it feels more like I’m in “sales” than the rabbinate; I’m constantly trying to “sell” Judaism to others.

Is it blasphemous for me to say such things, G-d, particularly on this, the holiest night of the year?

I don’t think so. I know You are The Deep Place of Knowing, one of my favorite names for You. Brutal honesty is what is asked of us, *davka*, especially, on Yom Kippur, even if it’s hard to say, or to hear.

Recently, someone sent me a copy of an article that was in the Jewish Forward, “Is There a Future for Jews without Judaism?” (Eisner, Jane, editor-in-chief, September 2018). The author, Jane Eisner, editor in chief, was reflecting on the results of the Pew Research Study from five years ago, October 2013. She said that the real dismaying headline wasn’t the growth of intermarriage, or the dramatically shrinking Conservative movement, or the fact that non-Orthodox Jews were

having fewer and fewer children. It was the finding that young Jews were increasingly saying--often proudly-- that they have no religion at all—despite identifying themselves as Jews. Some identify culturally or ethnically. Some are secular. Some believe in God, some don't, and some even belong to a synagogue.

“These ‘Jews of no religion’ were/[are] rewriting the norms of Jewish behavior,” Eisner wrote. And, the trend has very likely only increased in the past five years, mirroring the national religious landscape, where 22.8% of Americans now say they are religiously unaffiliated.

And herein lies my dilemma, G-d: I so want both Judaism and the Jewish People not just to continue, but to thrive into the future. So--I'm trying to figure out how I, as a rabbi, can best serve the needs and interests, the real realities of the Jewish People today, in 2018, and at the same time, be true to You, and to the Judaism that I so love and believe in.

I know that I am not alone; so many others besides me have struggled with this too—trying to find ways to engage Jews and their families in Judaism and Jewish traditions in ways that are meaningful, nourishing, relevant, compelling.

I've been reading about some of the innovative things that have been happening in other Jewish communities around the country, to meet Jews where they are and offer things that are appealing. I read that in New York, a group called Tribeca Hebrew has held several events that paired different wines with different aspects of Jewish mysticism: Zohar and Zinfandel, *Sefirot* and Syrah, Cosmos and Cabernet. And that The New Shul, also in New York, holds stimulating and refreshing adult education sessions with names like Kabbalah and Cosmopolitans and *Mussar* and Mojitos in bars around Manhattan. (Goldstein, Rabbi Niles Elliot, [Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith](#), St. Martin's Press, NY, 2006, p. 15-16). I've heard of similar gatherings called Jews and Brews.

I found these examples in a book by Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein, [Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith](#), given to me by a member of Kol Haneshamah who said that the book helped him find his way back to Judaism.

“In-your-face audacity,” Goldstein writes. “Taking it to the streets. Informality. Merging head and heart. These have been some of the guiding principles of the new Judaism that many Jews, especially the younger generation of Jewish leaders, have been following in our ongoing quest to find—or construct—a revitalized faith.”

In the past I've thought of some of these as gimmicks, and was reluctant to go this route. But maybe I've been wrong.

Referring to these gatherings, Goldstein writes that “Some of the participants—members who I'd usually see only a couple of times a year, during the High Holy Days—*stayed until closing*.” (p. 15).

I have to admit, I don't particularly like Goldstein's “in-your-face” style of writing. But, in his book there are many examples of new approaches to Judaism and Jewish practice that I *do* find appealing, intriguing, compelling. Some are audacious, some outrageous, some, provocative and some, perhaps, even controversial. But they *do* get the creative juices flowing. At least mine.

One example that I particularly loved was Storahtelling: Jewish Ritual Theater Revived. Storahtelling is s a group of young Jewish educators, musicians, and performance artists who are trying to revive the public reading of Torah. A few of us who attended the Reform Biennial convention a few years back experienced them at Saturday morning services. I found it absolutely riveting. On about six raised platforms throughout the very large room were people poised to read from Torah scrolls. The whole congregation—about 5000 of us--joined together to chant the blessing before the Torah reading. Someone chanted a verse or two from the scroll, and then,

suddenly, another person interrupted and offered a translation and a creative interpretation of the passage just read. It was like hearing Torah for the first time. They made the Torah's message real, relevant, and to me, at least, very compelling.

The creator of Storahtelling is Amichai Lau-Lavie, who was brought up and educated in an Orthodox yeshiva in Israel. He was immersed in, but then eventually oppressed by, a rigid kind of Judaism he ultimately felt forced to abandon. He looked around him and saw that the vast majority of Torah services were staid, stuffy, and achingly unexciting affairs. "Many of my peers don't [didn't] go to synagogue because they're [were] bored to death," he said.

Lau-Lavie knew that for hundreds of years the Torah was read in the marketplace or in the public square. A *meturgemon*, or "interpretive translator" would translate the original Hebrew verses into the vernacular, since only the most educated classes could understand the original Hebrew. In time, as the Torah service grew longer and the practice of giving a more formal sermon was added, the *meturgemon* disappeared from history.

Out of his awareness of this practice, he was inspired to create Storahtelling.

I would love to bring innovative approaches like Storahtelling, and yes, maybe even Jews and Brews to our community's observances and celebrations. I thought about creating a really giant Moses puppet to appear at the Torah service this morning, when we read, "Atem Nitzavim hayom, kulchem . . ." "You stand this day, all of you, in the presence of Adonai your G-d . . . not only with those who are here this day, but also with those who are not here on this day." I thought it would be really enlivening, revitalizing, to have us all stand here, together, and experience hearing those words, addressed to us, as if for the first time.

But I wasn't sure how everyone would respond.

And to be honest, G-d, I don't want the impetus to bring Judaism alive to come just from me. I need partners. Perhaps more than anything, I need and want others to be equally, passionately engaged in the important, sacred, and exciting work of making Judaism meaningful, relevant, and compelling for those of us who are living it today.

As Rav Kook interpreted the verse that we sing over and over again at this time of year: "*chadesh yameinu k'kedem*": "Let us make the old new, and the new holy."

I truly think that it is only when these are meaningful, relevant, and compelling G-d, that Judaism will continue—not only to survive, but also to thrive—into the future.

So G-d, I really pray that my People—the Jewish People as a whole, but also those who are part of my community—members *and* non-members--will let me know what they want and what they need. I hope that after the Gates of Repentance have closed and we've all recovered from this intense day of reflection and introspection, that my schedule will be filled up from morning to night with plans to meet for coffee or lunch or Jews and brews (!) and people will tell me what would make Judaism come alive for them, what would make them want to come and participate, what they are hungering for in their Jewish lives. And I pray that we'll have endless conversations and the creative juices will flow, mine and theirs, and we'll create it—Judaism--together—with thoughtfulness, and respect, and playfulness, and integrity.

Thank you for listening to me, G-d. I *know* you are the Deep Place of Knowing, and You probably already knew what was on my heart. Still, it's been helpful for me to express my thoughts out loud, and hear the words echo out beyond my own mind and heart, and into the world.

I've gotta go now, G-d. I have some things I need to do. Help lead my People, my community, into this New Year. I sure hope, with Your help of course, it will be a good one. May it be so.