

## **“JEWISH OPTIMISM”**

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This sermon starts with a joke I just heard. A Jewish optimist and a Jewish pessimist were sitting around talking. The Jewish pessimist turns to the Jewish optimist and says: “Oy, things can’t get any worse for our people.” The Jewish optimist turns to the Jewish pessimist, smiles, and says: “Sure it can!”

That’s Jewish optimism.

That joke came from a seminar I didn’t attend but wish I could have because it must have been a hoot. In August, a group of rabbis in Los Angeles got together with some comedy writers and brainstormed about writing High Holiday sermons. Janet Leahy, comedy writer for “*The Simpsons*”, Lisa Albert from the AMC series “*Mad Men*”, David Israel of Nickelodeon’s “*How to Rock*” and Jason Katims of “*Freaky Friday Lights*” and Fox’s “*Boston Public*” were part of an all-star group of TV writers that met with rabbis from the *Board of Rabbis of Southern California*. The gathering was created by the local Jewish Federation. It was a workshop where rabbis got to hand rough draft sermons over to these writers and get their critique, given advice on what works and how to add things to give them greater appeal.

As the writer for “*Mad Men*”, Lisa Albert told the rabbis, “The High Holy Days is like your sweeps” referring

to the last week of October to November and the last week of April into May where a shows audience size and composition are determined. “This is it; this is your chance to connect with your ‘audience’. You got to grab them and keep them in the first 30 seconds or you lose them.”

And that is why I started with a joke and one that reflects the mood of many of us.

The mood in this country, the feeling I get from talking to so many of you is one of uncertainty. People live in fear of the very collapse of our economic system and the breakdown of the much revered institutions we have long believed were sound and would help solve our problems. We fear everything, from a collapse of our way of life to a potential attack that will make September 11th pale in comparison.

Jews have a growing existential fear for the safety of Israel, what is going to be the end result of the “Arab Spring” and what will instability in Egypt, Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria mean for our Jewish state. We worry about how Israel will survive in a world where an Iran, with a stated desire to wipe Israel off the map, moves closer to having nuclear capability.

And then we fear what is happening within our own communities. For our people, we have a serious fear for our own survival; not a physical threat to our existence but a spiritual demise. We, as Jews in America, worry about what can be done with the declining Jewish population in America, what will happen to congregations that are struggling financially and those that have seen huge drops in membership. Communities where there are no young

Jews, where the next generation is so disconnected to our religious and cultural institutions that sociologists raise serious concerns about the very survival of our people as a presence in America.

And then there are the fears that we have as individuals: if we have jobs, will they be there 5 years from now? If I am looking for one, will I be ever able to find one in this job market? Will my children and grandchildren be able to make it in this world? How will I be able to afford college for my son and daughter? How will I ever be able to retire? How will I be able to pay the medical bills if surgery is recommended?

Good thing it can't get any worse!

But if you are a Jewish optimist, take comfort:

Sure, it can!

As a rabbi, these are the fears I hear from people every day in my office, around the breakfast table after minyan, at 'Lunch with the Gals' or the 'Guys', and in conversation throughout the day. These feelings of fear are being shared with my fellow clergy in the area, fears for our nation, our communities, and our families.

But while Jews may be born pessimists, I want to talk about the optimism found in faith. We are here today to raise our spirits, to learn to rise above our fears and concerns. Judaism is not about pessimism, an outlook that "things can't get any worse" nor an 'optimistic' one of: "Sure, it can!" Judaism teaches us to be believers in G-d, to put our trust in G-d and not to be afraid of the future. It is going to be all right.

Three times a times, at the end of each of our daily services, we say the "Aleynu" prayer. Until we began using

our new siddurim (daily prayer books), most of us did not realize that there is another small paragraph that is silently read immediately after the Aleynu. It is haunting, it is comforting and it is very Jewish. Called “Al Tirah” (Do not Fear), it says:

*“Do not fear sudden terror, nor the destruction of the wicked when it comes. Form a plot, but it will fail; lay a plan, but it will not prevail, for G-d is with us. To your old age, I am with you; to your hoary years I will sustain you; I have made you, and I will carry you; I will sustain you and deliver you.....”*

Before we take leave of G-d, we are reminded to not be afraid.

I have to believe that the rabbis of blessed memory had a deeper reason when deciding which sections of the Torah we read on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur. Our weekly Shabbat readings are set, for they are arranged in chronological order, broken up every week in such a way to finish the Torah in a one year cycle. However, the readings for holidays were selected, and selected for a reason. For Pesach (Passover), the Torah readings deal with the Exodus, Sukkot reflects on the features of the Feast of Tabernacles, and so on. Even for a post-Biblical holiday like Chanuka, the rabbis found Torah readings for those days that reflect the theme of that holiday, namely, the dedication ceremony of the first Tabernacle.

But that doesn't seem to be the case for Rosh Hashana. The readings these past two days do not connect at all to the holiday. They never once mention the

sounding of the shofar, the theme of G-d as Creator or the beginning of the new year. No connection whatsoever to the holiday. Yesterday, we were given the story of our “First Family”: Abraham and Sarah, the maid servant Hagar, and the two boys (Ishmael, the son of Hagar and Isaac, the son of Sarah).

I have to laugh. Thinking back to that seminar in Los Angeles I mentioned earlier, this Torah section (Genesis 21) would make for a great sit-com or a reality television show, something along the lines of “*Keeping up with the Abrahams*”. You’ve got the world’s most dysfunctional family, a husband (Abraham) and wife (Sarah) who struggle to get along, another woman (Hagar) who used to be best friends with the wife but is now despised after having sex with Abraham. And yet, they all live in the same tent. You also have two boys (Isaac and Ishmael), same father but different mothers, pitting against each other by their mothers with the poor father caught in the middle. You’ve got yourself quite a comedy or a reality show! This writes itself.

And then today, we are given more family tension as the Abraham has to make a very difficult decision about the future of his son, his family, and his life (Genesis 22). Abraham is at a crossroads and has to make a choice that will affect his son’s life and will decide his own legacy, now and forever.

So why are we reading about all this family tension and personal anguish? What does this all have to do with Rosh Hashana? Maybe it is to remind us of what to keep in mind today and hopefully, carry with us through life as we begin another year: life is filled with tension, with fear

and uncertainty about the future. After all, these are Abraham and Sarah, our patriarch and matriarch, and they didn't know what the future was going to hold for them or their children. They had no idea what the future held, and things always looked like they were about to fall apart for them. And yet, as the main characters of each reading are told in both readings, do not be afraid and put your trust in G-d.

Put your trust in G-d.

That is what we should be carrying in our hearts during this very uncertain year ahead. Not that things can't get any worse. It sure can. But the idea that no matter what happens, good or bad, let us have faith in G-d that things will always turn out all right.

Despite the seeming prominence of religious followers in politics and culture, America has shrinking congregations, growing dissatisfaction with religious leaders and a rising numbers of people who do not think highly of faith. Those were the most recent conclusions in a new study by Duke University. Over 20 percent of all Americans now say they don't belong to any religious group, compared to just 3 percent in the 1950's. Many more, much more than ever don't attend or are active in a place of worship, the highest numbers ever recorded.

I cannot help but feel that while there are obviously many factors at work, one possible reason may be that religion as presented today is irrelevant to people. It is not that people don't believe in G-d. The study found that 92 percent of all Americans still profess a faith in G-d. They just cannot connect their belief to a religion.

I can see that. Often, the religion outlook given to people is either be part of a system that speaks of a G-d that one prays to and in return answers and performs miracles (the “santa claus” view of G-d) or be part of a modern view of religious institutions that de-emphasizes prayer and reflection and is increasingly involved in social action (the progressive view of religion). Given those two choices, most simply opt out.

I am not being critical of either approach, but what I am suggesting is that many are finding religion lacking because they are not prepared to accept an outlook that says pray and G-d intervenes nor that religion is simply gathering to unite in support of causes. People don't believe in the former and they don't need a religious tradition for the latter. They want a religious outlook that better reflects their understanding of G-d and the world.

I think that religious view is one of a world filled with the presence of G-d. A religious outlook that speaks of a G-d who loves us, cares about us, but is not there to perform miracles like a genie. Rather, a G-d who helps us realize that life simply is and all we can do is put our trust in Him, take another step forward knowing that G-d is with us; not necessarily to answer our prayers, but to be with us.

Putting your trust in G-d doesn't mean G-d intervenes. It means that you will make it through any crisis because G-d shares it with you. You are not alone. The Creator of the Universe walks with you, embraces you, cares about you. You are not alone.

As I draw this to a close, let me leave you with something that has helped me focus when I prayer. More

and more, I see the beauty of referring to G-d, as we do, as: “the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob.” That is not just an ancient formula; that is a mantra of comfort. There is something eternal knowing that G-d was there for our patriarchs, is here with us, and will be there for our children. Generation to generation. That gives me an anchor in my life, an eternal strength that allows me to put our trust in our world.

You all know the famous conversation Moses has with G-d in Exodus where Moses tells G-d right before going to Egypt that “the people will ask for Your name. What shall I say to them? And G-d says to Moses: Tell them: Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (I will be what I will be)”-Exodus 3: 13-14.

That does nothing for me. But there is more to what G-d says that most forget to quote. G-d continues: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: The L-rd, the G-d of your fathers – *the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob* – has sent me to you. This is my name forever, the name you shall remember from generation to generation.”

That is a comfort.

That is the G-d that I put my trust in, the same One that my ancestors did and the One who has been with my people from generation to generation. I can face the problems, the trials, the difficulties of life because the G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is with me.

We are standing on the threshold of another year and another year of uncertainty and of concern for the future. How are we going to make it? By putting trust in a G-d who has been there from generation to generation, the



source of strength for our people. No matter what, it is going to be all right. Of that, we can be certain and not be afraid.

Amen