

**Sermon by Dr. Jordan Paper**  
**Yom Kippur Morning (Wednesday, September 19, 2018)**

WHY DO WE CELEBRATE THE HIGH HOLIDAYS?

Corresponding with Rabbi Goldberg a year ago, I made some comments about the High Holidays. She suggested I give a sermon here the following year. So here I am.

When I last gave a sermon in 1961, I was thrown out of a theological school for heresy. I do so now with some misgiving; I hope you checked your stones at the door.

The huge sanctuary of the Orthodox synagogue in Baltimore my family went to before I left for college was virtually empty most of the year, but during the High Holidays, not only was it filled to capacity, but so were the auditorium and social hall which had ancillary services. This continues to be the situation today for many synagogues and temples. Why? Is Judaism a religion acknowledged by most of its adherents but ten days out of the year? And why these ten days?

Historically, the High Holidays, as presently understood, are latecomers to the schedule of Jewish festivals. The High Holidays came to the fore Post-Diaspora when Jews in Europe began to suffer from mass murder and expulsions by Christians. The High Holidays came to be known as the Days of Awe, when the books of life and death were opened, and God's Chosen People were judged by God as to how much they will suffer as punishment for their sinning in the previous year.

My earliest memory of the High Holidays is going with my father to the water's edge of a nearby reservoir and with him throwing pebbles from our pockets into the water to symbolize throwing away our sins (*tashlikh*). I was six or seven years old; how sinful could I have been? On the Yom Kippur following my Bar Mitzvah, being ritually but not physically or socially mature, I beat my breast while holding the fringes of my tallis in my fist, publicly and ritually confessing to sins many of which I was not yet able to commit (*Al Chet*). I was well aware of the absurdity. And those in the shul doing it were probably atheists, as are most Jews since the Holocaust, which, according to the

Chief Sephardic Rabbi in Jerusalem a decade ago, was God's punishment for the development of Reform Judaism in Germany.\*

If God is omnipotent, then logically all suffering is caused by Him. In Amos we find: **Shall evil befall a city, and the LORD hath not done it?** (3.6). In Isaiah, we read: **The LORD of hosts, Him shall you sanctify; and let Him be your fear, and let Him be your dread.** (8.13). Thus, the Assyrian and Babylonian kings, as well as the Crusaders, the Inquisition and Hitler, were but carrying out the will of God. Well the Holocaust was the final kick in the ass. Who needs such a God? So why are you here?

As many modern Orthodox children,\*\* I came to understand that God was a fantasy similar to Santa Claus in the Christian tradition. My relatives kept saying to me – for I was a somewhat naughty boy – that God would punish me by having me run over by a streetcar or getting cancer. Besides my family and their friends were all Chesapeake Bay Orthodox, meaning we relished oysters and crabs. But I and my family were not run over by streetcars and didn't get cancer. So much for God! But Judaism without God is a Judaism with a hole in its center; it loses its core meaning; it becomes an empty shell.

I was the typical modern Jewish atheist until a dozen years ago. As a scholar, my area of interest had become comparative theology. When I retired from teaching, I thought to put together my interest in Chinese religion and Judaism and investigate the theology of the Chinese Jews. Given they lived in a benign social and religious environment in which they **never** suffered as Jews and, indeed, did exceedingly well over many, many centuries, how did they understand God? It had to be different from the Ashkenazi and Sephardi understandings, given their radically different circumstances.

These Jews came from the Baghdad area in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, leaving from the port of Basra, so I needed to understand the theology they brought with them to China, and thus began to look at Medieval Jewish theology. Saadia Gaon headed one of the rabbinic schools in Baghdad around that time. He wrote the first siddur and a theological treatise. For Saadia, God is incorporeal: **“Once, then, the demand that the Creator be a physical being has been proved to be absurd, the arrogation to Him of bodily**

**accidents in general must likewise be excluded.”\*\*\*\*** In other words, modeling the notion of God on a Babylonian or Persian autocratic emperor, a Lord of Lords, was a logical error, as well as providing the idea of God with the characteristics of a despotic tyrant, such as jealousy, anger, revenge, punishing, if not paranoia and psychopathic vehemence. Hence, those Persian Jews probably came to China without a notion of a punitive deity and entered a life in China with no suggestion of divine retribution.

The Chinese Jews had two expressions for God in Chinese, taken from Chinese philosophical and religious terms. One was half of the binomial expression of *Tiandi* (Sky-Earth). As Sky, God had a couple of meanings for these Jews. On the one hand, “Sky” meant the amalgam of all the souls of dead Jews, not just the Patriarchs and Prophets, but of the entire past of Judaism, which in China had considerable meaning, given the importance of ancestors. Hence, in this sense of Sky, God was the full tradition of Judaism and the entire line of Jews from the distant past to the present. On the other hand, the star-pattern of Sky, in the astrological sense, meant fate, all that happens, good and bad, but what happens is not due to a humanoid will.

The second and more important term was *Dao*. In the cosmogony of the educated in China at that time, from *wu*, Nothingness, comes *yu*, Somethingness, which is arbitrarily named “Dao.” This singularity of existence bifurcates into the male-female Sky-Earth (or matter) and the female-male Yin-Yang (or energy), and the continuous double conjoining of the two sexed cosmic pairs continuously produces the multitude of all living things.

Those who have had what I call the mystic experience, which others have called the null, void or zero-experience, understand that this is not a philosophical understanding but a description of what one apprehends coming out of the experience. \*\*\*\* For those theologically oriented, in all of the Abrahamic traditions, this blissful experience of Nothingness is understood as the experience of God. Given the number of people here, at least some of you know exactly to what I am referring. Thus, for the Chinese Jews, the foci of worship on the one hand was Judaism itself and all of the Jews of the past, and on the other hand, the continuous creation of life; that is, existence in and of itself.

This understanding of God is in accord with the Torah. In the Exodus story, when Moses encounters an eternal light, expressed by the metaphor of an ever-burning bush, he understands that he is in the presence of the sacred, the God of the mythic founding Ancestors. The experience of merging and losing one's self in an all-encompassing intensely bright light is at the heart of the mystic experience in all traditions, as well as most near-death experiences. Moses asks God's name. God answers, "**I am Existence,**" and further, "**Thus shall you say to the children of Israel, Existence has sent me to you**" (Exodus 3:1-14).

In other words, God can be understood as a Nothingness that is the source of our ancestors and is infinitely continuing existential potential (*Ein Soph* in Jewish mysticism): God is our own existence and of those we love, indeed, all of existence at all times – what is, has been and will be. God is the breathing of our lungs and the blood coursing through our arteries. If we love ever-changing life, then we love God. This interpretation is precisely in accord with a modern Haredi Jewish theologian, Tzvi Freeman: "**...existence itself. The flow. The infinite flow of light and energy. Of being, of existence. Of is—that is G-d.**"# The eminent contemporary Jewish theologian, Michael Fishbane, writes of God as "**the ultimate Source of all things...Life of all life.**"##

For the first time in my life, excluding my understandings within polytheistic traditions, I found a God that made sense to me. I can now recite the **Shema** (slightly modified) wholeheartedly: "**Listen Israel, our God/Life/Existence is an all-encompassing oneness, and you shall love God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might**" (Deut. 6:4–5). There is only love; there is not one iota of fear.

The authors of the books of Amos, Isaiah and the other Prophets didn't get it. Same for many Haridim today, especially those who, for fear of God's punishment, nearly beat a woman to death in Jerusalem for not sitting at the back of a bus.### Many bad, indeed horrible, things happen, but why is there is a need to find a divine cause for misfortune, the causation assumed to be a psychopathic God seeking to punish us for the slightest infraction of human-made customs, often reprehensible or idiotic?

So what about the High Holidays? If we need an excuse to come together at least once a year for hopefully a communal spiritual experience, need these be Days of Awe, of trepidation of disaster? Wouldn't it be better if we came together for Days of Wonder, to celebrate together the joy of life?

This is what the Israelites did. They celebrated Sukkoth, substituting celebrating a legend of wandering in the wilderness for the grain planting and fruit harvest festival; and Pesach, substituting a celebration of the mythic exodus from Egypt for the grain harvest festival. There was a day for a ritual to void sin by the Second Temple High Priest alone before Sukkoth, see Leviticus 16. This seems to have been expanded to all in Leviticus 23 as a Day of Atonement. However, Yom Kippur is not mentioned in the Tanakh in the list of major festivals – Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkoth – and the Kol Nidre prayer, with its beautiful haunting melody which fills my head at this time of the year, seems to be a late Medieval development, arising at a time of extreme Christian persecution and, especially, forced conversion; hence, the renunciation of oaths.

It's a good thing to reflect on our actions over the course of a year. Few if any of us are perfect, and to ask for forgiveness from friends and loved ones for our failings is salutary. But this is only an aspect of what traditionally Yom Kippur is about; it is primarily begging for forgiveness from a vengeful anthropomorphic God not only for major lapses of behavior, but for the most minor of infringements of ever-increasing prohibitions invented by rabbis who wish to placate a sadistic and vindictive deity, such as not using a motion-actuated flush toilet on this day or on shabbas.####

In essence, do we need a God who enforces silly restrictions on behavior with dire punishments or a God that is a celebration of life? As I wrote this sermon, I found this sentence in *Haaretz*, regarding the Haridim and Pesach in Jerusalem: **“During the holiday itself no allowances are made for hametz: Every microscopic crumb of leavened food brings with it a heavenly death sentence,”####** as would putting a shoe on the wrong foot first. That is, have in your abode during Pesach a single minuscule piece of leavened bread one couldn't even see with a magnifying glass and God will kill you – this is not in the Torah, it is the invention of meshuganah rabbis, some considering the outfit of 11<sup>th</sup> century Khazar merchants and 18<sup>th</sup>-century Polish

rent collectors to be holy garb. And these extreme dictates regarding preparation for Pesach are now promoted by the Assembly of Conservative Rabbis, who are theoretically liberal!

Do we want a God to fear or a God to love; a God that makes sense, or a God to reject? We humans create our notion of God, so why not have a God that celebrates life and brings us joy, reflecting the bliss of Nothingness, invariably understood by Abrahamic mystics as the experience of God? And so I end with the common Jewish toast and prayer: **L'Chaim, to life.**

Jordan Paper (Yehoshua ben Yosef) – 19 (Wed) Sept 2018

## NOTES

\*Rettig, Haviv, "Olmart Blasts Rabbi Eliyahu's Remarks Blaming Reform Jews for Holocaust," *Jerusalem Post*, 20 April 2007.

\*\*E.g., Shalom Auslander, *Foreskin's Lament: A Memoir* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2007).

\*\*\*Saadia Gaon, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, trans. by Samuel Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948): 93.

\*\*\*\*For a fuller explication, see Jordan Paper, *The Theology of the Chinese Jews, 1000-1850* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012).

#E.g., Tzvi Freeman:

[http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/1595892/jewish/What-is-Gd.htm](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1595892/jewish/What-is-Gd.htm).

##Michael Fishbane, *Sacred Attunement: A Jewish Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008): 34.

###<http://talk.politics.mideast.narkive.com/jY9Wdsiz/5-ultra-orthodox-jews-beat-the-hell-out-of-woman-in-public>. [Jonathan Lis, Haaretz: October 21, 2007.]

####If one ever feels low and needs a good laugh, assuming one is a liberal Jew, see <https://www.star-k.org/articles/kashrus-kurrents/505/dont-miss-the-boat-halachic-guidelines-of-kosher-cruises/>.

#####Haaretz - Israel News Sunday, November 26, 2017. Kislev 8, 5778 Time in  
Israel: 3:08 A

<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/how-passover-rules-strike-fear-in-the-heart-of-the-hasidic-community-1.42299>.