

I Believe in G-d

The title of this sermon is I Believe in G-d.

As I sit here attempting to write this sermon I think to myself 'what have I gotten myself into?'. Last year when Cantor Wunch asked me about writing a sermon I thanked her for thinking of me, however, politely declined as I had too much on my plate in regards to 'life stuff'. This year I reached out to Cantor Wunch earlier in the year asking if I would be able to provide a sermon as I thought some of my 'life stuff' would have calmed down for me by the time of the High Holidays and there would be room on my plate to take on writing a sermon. Well, the 'life stuff' did not calm down unfortunately, and at the beginning of August when I had intended to write this sermon some extra and additional 'life stuff' decided to present itself. Now it's the end of August and I'm finally sitting down to write the sermon as the extra 'life stuff' thankfully settled down and I have a bit of breathing room, however, I still think to myself 'what have I gotten myself into? I'm just so exhausted and just want to sleep.'

At the same time, I think to myself G-d has helped carry me through the previous three years of my life (among all the other years) and these past three years of my life have been some of the most difficult years in my life so far. So, I thought I would like to take a pause, and at least take the time to say thank you to G-d, and give Him some proper recognition and respect. I noticed a lot of our prayers in Judaism mention praising G-d and giving thanks, so this is my own way of doing so, in an expanded form. Also, just of note, I'll refer to G-d as He/Him, that is just what I'm using, however, of course feel free to replace with whatever manifestation you feel fit. I haven't given much thought to what I believe as a manifestation, however, am just using He/Him for now as a placeholder as this is the convention I grew up with, but at the same time we know that conventions can change as society progresses and evolves. Additionally, this sermon is not to convince anyone to believe in G-d, I know there are many thoughts around this topic, I'm just mentioning what I believe.

I remember once a long time ago someone saying to me that they are culturally Jewish and I think she didn't believe in G-d and I thought to myself 'Hm? How does that work?' as it didn't make sense to me. Still, I respected the fact that we could have different ideologies and still get along. I also went on a few dates with someone a few years ago, someone who is very involved and on the Board of their synagogue, however, this person didn't believe in G-d as well. Again, I thought 'Hm? How's that work?' and asked, 'but then who are you praying to when you say your prayers?'. They explained that they enjoyed synagogue and its rituals, they enjoyed the social aspect, and again they were more culturally Jewish.

In both instances, I think both people mentioned that it was difficult to believe in G-d when such bad things have happened to either them or someone they know or in the world in general. I could understand their frustrations, however, mentioned that G-d is not a genie in a bottle or Santa Claus just granting wishes and giving presents, He has His own plan and sometimes that involves difficulties for those involved. It's

not like I'm only going to believe in G-d as long as only good things happen to me and to those I care about and in the world in general, that is conditional love and belief, and from my understanding when you truly love someone, you love all parts, even the parts that are not particularly convenient. So now G-d has given me some breathing room in the mess that has been my life for the past three years to write this sermon, even though I'm exhausted, and for me this is one of the examples of proof for me to believe in Him, even among some of the most difficult years of my life so far.

When I spoke to Cantor Wunch she mentioned that the theme this year is Hineni (Here I Am) and when I read the text of the prayer I had a bit of trouble with it. It speaks of the reader as being 'poor in deeds', 'trembling in fear', and 'hardly worthy'. I thought this is kind of insulting, I try to do good deeds, from my understanding we are not supposed to fear G-d, and I do think I'm worthy. But then again for this sermon, this sermon I signed-up to write, I was concerned: would it be good enough, would it do justice and praise G-d well enough, and felt that I might not know enough about the Jewish religion to tie everything together to make an impactful impression. I'm kind of a novice when it comes to religion as I find it very confusing, and I thought 'oh, I do fit into these categories in this sermon context of 'poor in deeds', 'trembling in fear' (maybe not trembling, but at least fearful), and not feeling worthy. It is G-d after all, and I'm speaking about Him, kind of a big topic, so I hope I do ok by Him. Further, from my understanding, as long as someone is trying, even though they make mistakes, G-d takes the intention into account and is satisfied with the effort. But again, should I have studied religion more, done more, given up eating bacon earlier in my life, but with the theme Here I Am, I guess Here I Am, at this moment, possibly imperfect as noted by the prayer, hoping that what I've done is good enough.

Now, I'm not going to go into the details of what I've had to deal with over the last three years, basically, because I don't want to, but also because the details don't matter. Just think of one of the most difficult times in your lives and then you'll understand, and if you haven't had any then I am genuinely happy for you. I will, however, disclose that the main driver in my difficulties over the last three years is because I stood up for myself and that the fallout which had resulted produced incredible hardships for me. Add on top of that a few health issues that decided to join the party, which thankfully have been looked after well and any remaining are being looked after well, and the complexity of dealing with everything all together just seemed impossible at times.

Throughout this three year journey though came some positives. I learned more about Emunah and Bitachon (hope I'm pronouncing them correctly). Emunah meaning faith, and as I describe it, Bitachon being a faith-ier faith. Also, my Google search notes the following about Bitachon:

"Generally translated as "trust," bitachon is a powerful sense of optimism and confidence based not on reason or experience, but on emunah."

Another Google result for Bitachon mentions:

“...faith in an active sense, consciously placing the burden of one's concerns and worries on God and trusting that things will work out.”

And Google also notes:

“Emunah is a state of understanding. Bitachon is a state of trust. Emunah comes from studying this world and seeing that there is a Creator. Bitachon is the state of trust that comes from recognizing that that Creator is good, kindly and wise—and that He cares deeply for His creations.”

This gave me comfort, knowing that G-d looks to have my best interest in mind and heart and that the intention looks to be that things will work out for the best for me. I'm not sure how, however, I guess I'll find out once this journey is complete, and even if things don't work out well for me with my current struggles, I know that G-d has reasoning in His overall larger plan, which is still me trusting G-d in my purpose and still me continuing to have Emunah and Bitachon.

Throughout the last three years, I had thought to myself on multiple occasions 'what is going on with my life' and I had literally said multiple times 'G-d, what are you doing to me?'. I had already gone through an incredibly difficult few years about twenty years ago, and now I have to go through an incredibly difficult few years again? Oy vey. For those that do not know the expression 'oy vey', this translates to indication of dismay or grief. I also thought about if I had done anything wrong to deserve these recent hardships. But I ultimately landed on this is what He wants me to do, this is the battle that for whatever His reasoning He wants me to fight, and so I guess looks like I'm fighting it, Here I Am, possibly imperfect, hopefully ready and prepared.

I also said to G-d once or twice 'G-d, I get that you want me to fight this battle, but could we, like, wrap things up with this already?' and thought I'd like to get back to the regularly scheduled programming of my life, a nice, mostly comfortable routine.'. However, that's the thing about battles, you don't know when they'll end, you don't know what you'll be struck with over the course of the battle, you don't know how exhausted you'll become, as well as about the possible bumps and bruises along the way, you don't know the extent of frustrations you'll feel and how you may be stretched beyond your limit, and you don't know what kind of shape you'll be in post-battle. It's a tough time, it's a lot of unknowns and uncertainty, however, that's where the Emunah and Bitachon come in, I just have to trust, have faith, and keep moving forward.

From what I've learned about Passover, when the Jews left Egypt to go to the Promised Land fewer than half went on the journey. The rest stayed in Egypt because they were comfortable in their routine, even

though it was that of slavery, as they didn't know what the unknown would bring. In the present time, some wonder if the ten plagues brought on Egypt were to encourage the Jews to have trust and courage, to help prompt them to leave their enslavement. We know that for those who left Egypt, G-d provided. He provided food, water, shelter, as well as parting of the sea; G-d provided what was needed for the journey.

For my own journey of the last three years, it encompassed leaving my comfortable routine and comfort zone, and venturing off into the unknown, the unknown for me anyway. I had never faced this particular situation I was dealing with (and currently continue to deal with), and I didn't know how it would go if I decided to pursue it. I fought for a while, however, it was becoming exhausting; emotionally, mentally, physically, etc. I even at one point scheduled a session with Cantor Wunch to talk things out to help relieve some of the pressure I was under as well as try to understand why this is happening to me. While the session definitely helped, ultimately it was still up to me to fight this battle, or in the very least choose to continue fighting it.

The funny thing is that for one of these last three years Cantor Wunch had informed us that it would be a Shmita Year, a year of rest for the agricultural land, and possibly us as well. I thought to myself 'Sweet! I'll be just chillin' this year', and for those that don't speak slang, this translates to 'Great! I'll be just relaxing this year.' Little did I know that I was wrong, very, very, very wrong. When I happened to discuss this clear contradiction of the Shmita Year against my struggles with a close friend, he mentioned to me something along the lines of 'Well Ran, you're not a farmer.'. The plants I used to have would likely agree. However, I replied by noting that I thought it was for us as well, if not even metaphorically.

The other item of note was that, from my understanding, the land had been so stripped of minerals over the previous 6 years that it needed a chance to rejuvenate in the 7th year of the Shmita 7 year cycle. Well, this part seemed more in line with what I was and am currently going through, many different aspects of my life had been stripped to a degree, one or two most notably to very large degrees, one of which is the battle I mentioned, fighting in the hopes of rejuvenation.

Then there was a time during last High Holiday season, when I was at one of my very lowest points. The entire High Holiday season had been a struggle for me, however, this point particularly stood out for me. It was Yom Kippur and I was very distracted. I couldn't tune into what I was supposed to be doing that day, namely for me to be connecting with G-d, praying, reflecting, seeking forgiveness, setting intentions for the upcoming year, etc. During services, I was literally lying in my bed, on Zoom with my laptop camera off, at least trying to be involved to some extent, no matter how small. I then thought, this is not what I should be doing, I should at least sit up, I've seen elderly people stand for the standing parts on other Yom Kippurs, one even with a walker, and even when I felt and wondered when the standing would stop during those years so we could sit again, this elderly person in particular with the walker, as well as others, stood with seemingly effortless conviction. I drew strength from their examples and moved to my couch and sat up, a level of effort greater than lying down, which for me at that time took a tremendous amount of

energy. I did what I had the strength and capacity to undertake, and I did stand for the standing parts because I thought those are extra important and I should be standing if I could, I might have sat down for part of one though, can't exactly remember.

Then it was time for a congregant member to deliver a sermon. I thought 'Sweet!/Great!, I'm gonna lie down on this comfy couch of mine, for which anyone who knows me well knows I refer to it as 'Bubby's couch' due to its inherited nature; shout out to my Bubby for this awesome couch. Also, Bubby means Grandmother for those who might not know. I lied down on my back, got all comfy underneath my white blanket and stared at the ceiling as well as a bit out of the window, and possibly closed my eyes a bit from time to time for about the first half of the sermon. As Brian was delivering his sermon I was kind of half paying attention, half not (sorry Brian) as I was kind of half paying attention, half not, to the entire High Holiday services that year (sorry Cantor Wunch and everyone else who prepared, organized, worked on, and delivered the services). I was doing the best I could at that time, again Here I Am, in not the greatest state, but I'm still Here, possibly imperfect. However, I was extremely distracted. I kept thinking of the struggles I've been through and the battle I'm still currently in as a result and was weighing options in my mind: 'Should I just give up? This is too much. This is effecting almost every aspect of my life. It would be easier to just give up than continue this battle not knowing how it will go, if it will yield a positive outcome for me, etc.'. The opponent seemingly is more powerful, experienced, and likely has more resources. This isn't even a fair fight.'

I kept going back and forth in my mind while still half-listening to Brian speak. Then Brian started listing off organizations he sought out for assistance. He kept listing them, and listing them, and listing them, and then when I thought he was done listing them, he listed many, many, many more. He finally eventually found an organization that was able to help, and help in a very quick and efficient way. Brian's sermon was about an NHL hockey video game released by the company Sega which had a very poorly curated advertisement running on television about 20 years ago, and mostly running during times when kids would tune in. The advertisement essentially compared male hockey players to male figure skaters with the messaging of 'real men play hockey' and even had one of the hockey players beat up one of the figure skaters. Further the advertisement had a negative portrayal of effeminate male figure skaters as well as the LGBTQIA2S+ community. Brian, a father to his son who was a 12 year-old figure skater at the time, was outraged, and this is where him reaching out to organizations came into the picture.

He reached out to the CRTC (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, an organization that operates at arm's length from the federal government), networks like CTV that were playing the advertisement, newspapers like the Star as well as the Globe, he even tried to get a hold of figure skaters Kurt Browning and Elvis Stojko. Brian was not able to get in contact with these figure skaters and from any organization in which he was able to discuss the issue, the organization only delivered lip service, mentioning they sympathized with his concerns, however, they did not take any action to pull the advertisement and its negative messaging off the air. Further, in Brian's sermon, he mentioned that his pursuits were a bit risky as Sega the video game producer owed a company that was one of Brian's clients. Further, Sega had the well known NHL hockey player Tie Domi in the advertisement who was paid for his

appearance which showed acceptance and favouring of the advertisement by this hockey player. It was the big company Sega, the big NHL name of Tie Domi, the risk to Brian regarding his employment due to his client being owned by Sega, and possibly any other risks; again, seemingly power and resource imbalances. Additionally, 20 years ago the LGBTQIA2S+ community had not progressed to where it is now. Currently there is still so much progress to be made in this area, and 20 years ago was an even more difficult climate with same-sex marriage just starting to be legalized in Canada; this is the environment with which Brian had to contend.

When I asked Brian if there was anything in Judaism that helped motivate him to push forward he answered with 'Tikkun Olam, making the world a better place.' and we talked about it in more detail. His answer made so much sense to me, like two puzzle pieces snapping together. Throughout my struggle I often compared my struggle metaphorically to the passing Jewish Holidays and events for which I am familiar. At one point during Purim I even thought 'am I like Vashti, taking a stand and being the one to suffer the consequences for the greater good, Esther becoming Queen resulting in the Jews being saved from all being killed?'. Brian was also taking a stand and had the risk of being in harm's way as it was an unknown how him standing up against the advertisement that was being broadcast to a population of millions of kids and adults would have turned out.

What eventually came to my mind's recognition with all these passing Jewish Holidays and events is that Jews fight back, and identifying this aspect helped give me strength. Further, what I eventually also realized in regards to the seemingly imbalance of power, experience, and resources in regards to my own story is that I have the truth, and G-d sees all, and He is the most powerful. This gave me comfort, knowing that ultimately whatever disputes people on Earth have are transcended by the spiritual; the ultimate outcome is in G-d's hands. Knowing this helped me strengthen my Emunah and Bitachon even more. Additionally, some say that true Emunah and Bitachon are achieved when the believer cannot foresee or determine the outcome of their efforts. Well, I have no idea how things will roll out for me in regards to my struggle, and so far I have been figuring things out along the way, however, since I've decided to take on the challenge without having any idea of how things will materialize I guess my Emunah and Bitachon levels are right up there at the 100% level. My guess is Brian didn't know what results his efforts would bring as well, however, decided to go forward in his pursuit – Tikkun Olam.

Eventually, through Brian's continual efforts and research he landed on the organization GLAAD out of Los Angeles. According to its current website GLAAD is "the world's largest Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) media advocacy organization – increases media accountability and community engagement that ensures authentic LGBTQ stories are seen, heard, and actualized.". GLAAD, along with David Geffen, a well-known Record Producer being part of GLAAD, had the advertisement pulled the day after Brian contacted the organization; success for Brian's endeavors and quick, efficient action taken by GLAAD.

It was this part of Brian's sermon, the part where he described how he kept reaching out to organizations and kept hitting brick walls that I started to pay full attention. This part of his story seemed like mine. Up until that point I was reaching out to resources for assistance, however, not making a lot of progress. I was making some progress, however, much, much, much less than I expected for who I was contacting, and it kind of felt like I had been spinning my wheels getting nowhere, and spinning my wheels for a very long time. It was around this point, on Yom Kippur of last year, that I had decided that I needed to definitively choose to either give up or keep going. Then I heard Brian's sermon, I heard it at the exact timing I was meant to, when I was the most uncertain as to whether to give up or to keep going. Through hearing the sermon it was evident and clear to me, that this was a sign to me from G-d to keep going, it was the encouragement and confirmation I needed at that exact time.

I kept moving forward in my battle and finally landed on some organizations that were able to help me in a more impactful way and finally felt like I was making traction and progress at a reasonable rate. The first two years did help though, I definitely had to go through the first two slower years to build upon to help really move forward in the third year, but I was happy that I was finally able to thankfully see a faster rate of progress.

So how will this journey end up for me? I don't know. However, now seems like a good time to recite the Hineni prayer, so here goes:

"Here I am, poor in deeds, trembling in fear in front of the Holy One of Israel. I came here before You to plead on behalf of Your people, who sent me, although I am hardly worthy of the task. Therefore, I shall ask You, Spirit of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah. Please, make my assignment successful, as I stand here, seeking compassion for myself and for all those who sent me. Please, do not condemn them for my faults, or me for theirs. Accept my prayer as if it came from one blessed with a pleasant voice and a pleasant temper. Please, turn our troubles and turmoil into gladness and joy. For it is You who mercifully listen to Your people's prayer. We praise You, the One who hears our prayers.

- Interpretative translation by Rabbi Oren Steinitz"

To finish up, there are other things that happened with my journey over the course of these last three years (and during my life in general) that again reinforce my belief in G-d, however, I've already spoken for quite a bit and I don't want to delay anyone from delicious apples and honey and delicious challah and honey, etc., but just of note these instances have been far too coincidental in what they were as well as accumulation over time to be just coincidence. The overall idea, however, tying these instances together is resources appearing when I needed them as well as timing of events, kind of like when the Jews left Egypt and received the resources they needed on their way to the Promised Land. To me it's clear that G-d has a purpose for me as well as for me being in this battle and He is supplying what is needed along the way. So G-d I say thank you for Your help and thank you for hearing my prayers. Even though I'm currently going through incredibly difficult times it is for Your purpose and I still believe in You.

Also, thank you to Shir Libeynu for the time and space to deliver and share my message as well for Shir Libeynu even existing to provide its services throughout the years.

Shana Tova everyone, have a meaningful High Holiday season and an easy fast should you choose to fast.

R.L.