

Erev Rosh HaShanah

Dear God or 'To Whom It May Concern'

September 28, 2011

“Shana Tova – may the new year, 5772, be filled with blessing, mazel, health and peace for us, Israel and our world – amen!” These words and sentiments, recited by Jews throughout the world this evening, are accompanied by the symbols for a good year: sweet wine, round, raisin-filled challahs and apples dripping with honey. Whether we label ourselves: secular, observant, liberal or traditional; tonight, our prayers, honest hopes and heartfelt wishes fill the heavens, giving new intensity to the very anthropomorphic expression: 'from our mouths to God's ears.'"

In a play written by screenwriter John Balderson, we find a man who dies and passes into the next world. When he opens his eyes, he sees more beauty and luxury than he has ever dreamed existed, with every wish, need or desire immediately fulfilled. After a time, he grows bored. “If only something different would happen,” he says to himself. “If only just one time, there would be a refusal, a problem with something or challenge to overcome.”

Finally, the monotony becomes unbearable and summoning one of the ever-present attendants says, “I don’t want to have anything unless I have worked for it or earned it, not just wished for it.” The attendant replies, “I’m very sorry sir, but that is the one wish we are unable to grant.” The man responds, “Very well, then let me out of here, I’d rather be in hell.” Whereupon the attendant asked, “Where do you think you are?”

The gentleman rightly assumed that he was in heaven because all of his desires

were immediately granted and all his wishes instantaneously fulfilled – how could it be anything but heaven? Wasn't that what he (and we) had always assumed heaven to be: a place of ongoing and continuous pleasure and joy?

How often have we, like that gentleman in his supposed heaven, fallen victim to other assumptions and truths, later proven to be false?

The child assumes that because the picture on the label of the container is not pretty, the food inside will taste yucky! A person I spoke to assumed that Weston was “snobby”. Why? Because everyone she had spoken to in Plantation said so.

A picture on a label or because “everyone said so” does not make it correct or true and in the words of Rabbi Marc Angel, “If you wish to pursue truth, you need to evaluate people and things as they really are – not as they appear to be.” Too often we cheat ourselves when we base our actions, not upon facts and truths, but upon assumptions and labels of others.

A label shows which designer or company has manufactured the piece of clothing we're examining and from that knowledge, as well as experience, we will know if runs big, small or worth the money. A label shows us which bag of cookies has macadamia nuts, chocolate chunks (or preferably both) and which one doesn't.

Labels allow us to read nutritional contents of products and to compare which one may be healthier for us and the better buy. Black beans on the label? Black beans in the can – no arguing, no discussing. And though it might be tempting to treat people the same way we do objects, it must never be forgotten that labels are meant for things, not human beings.

Envision two sealed containers without labels; now, imagine a label for each container, one with the word: "believer" and the other: "nonbeliever". What does each label look like? We usually connect those words with Christians or maybe Moslems, but rarely, if ever, Jews. If a Christian or Moslem is a believer, he is also a full member of the religion; if a non-believer; he is totally out of the group, plain and simple. However, if I use the label of believer or non-believer with Jews, it sounds treif and foreign to our ears, as if our Jewish container has somehow been mislabeled.

As Jews, we are more comfortable with the labels: "practicing" or "non-practicing". A "practicing" Jew does Jewish stuff; a "non-practicing" Jew doesn't do Jewish stuff; belief has nothing to do with it. We label ourselves a People, ethnic group, nation, family, tribe, way of life, philosophy and yes, religion – but are usually not comfortable with the totally religious labels of: believer/non-believer. And to give an extra "oomph" to that feeling, Judaism itself teaches that: even if one is a non-believer, "though he sins, he is still a Jew – *afal pi shehhuchoteh, yisraelhu*" – he is still part of our People and our community – no belief litmus test required.

The time has come to redefine the terms "Jewish believer" and "non-believer" in light of the Jewish world in which we find ourselves today.

As a rabbi, I contend that a Jewish "believer" is not necessarily someone professing a belief in God, but more importantly, is one who has hope in her heart, faith in herself, a willingness to embrace life and nature with Jewish sensitivity and awe. The Jewish believer holds that there is purpose to her life, that every one of her actions and deeds makes a difference in our world; her celebration of Rosh

HaShana is filled, not only with the symbols and promises of sweet, new beginnings as well as the limitless potential of correcting past wrongs and starting over with a clean spiritual slate.

The Jewish “nonbeliever's” relationship or nonrelationship with God has no impact upon that person's lifestyle. He has stone instead of hope in his heart, faith in nothing except himself and for whom life is only something to be manipulated in order to serve his own ends. He lives in a totally self-absorbed world and feels that there is no other purpose in life than to eat, drink and take from it as much and as quickly as possible before someone else gets it first. Rosh HaShana? Just a time to eat raisin challah, apples, honey, brisket and kugel. Religious commemoration? Much ado about nothing: New beginnings and repentance for past sins and actions? For others but not them. There are no reasons to start over, no spiritual slates to clean, no promises to make and no hopes to grow.

In my differentiation between the Jewish “believer” and “non-believer,” it may seem that I have minimized God, I haven't, and don't worry, God can take care of herself.

Liberal Jews do think of God, but not the way in which God has been thought of or described in days past. God hasn't changed, but for us, the label “God” has and that's not a bad thing. As God expects us to be honest in our dealings with our fellow human beings, so too does God expect us to be honest with God. Using someone else's labels or assumptions, in which we do not believe, about God, forces us to recite lies that perpetuate feelings of guilt and frustration tarnishing our Jewish souls and God as well.

Rabbi David Hartman, an American Orthodox Rabbi living in Jerusalem, writes in his most recent book, *The God Who Hates Lies*: “God (does not) want us...to use the authority of the past to lie to Him. The past has to be validated by your lived experience; if it’s not, and you say it is, that is a lie. Your reality has to confirm the validity of the language of the past...truth must grow out of...lived experience, not claims of truth based on authority...”

In other words, just because it may be written in an old book, have the word “traditional” associated with it, or someone once said it, does not necessarily make it true for you.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk once said, “No one has ever died from asking a question –*fun a kasheh, iznochkeinernishtgeshtorben.*” I have no problem asking questions, examining labels or opening cans to see for myself what is inside of them.

And, I am not alone in this questioning process.

Each and every one of us is worshipping in this Reform synagogue because we have realized that the past, beautiful as it may seem to be, does not have all the answers for us. Though we may remember certain things from our past with nostalgia, none of us are planning a return to either the belief system or religious practices of our ancestors.

To again quote Rabbi Hartman, “Tradition can claim us only if it is mirrored truthfully in the world in which we live...the tradition becomes true if it remains a plausible description of our own world...we need no permission...to see what is in

front of our eyes.”

Am I a 'believer'? Yes, I am, but not the same type of believer my father, my Bubbi or my great-grandparents were. Need I be? No, I do not, just as my children are not the same type of believer as am I. My reality is different from that of my ancestors, as each future generation's will be different from ours.

In the “*Mechilta*”, a rabbinic commentary on the *Book of Exodus* written almost 2,000 years ago, appears the following incisive interpretation of the first commandment, “I am the Lord your God – *AnochiAdonayElohecha*.” As I read the *Midrash*, notice how the “God-label” changes, while the contents, God, remains constant.

“Why is it said, ‘I am the Lord your God’? For this reason: at the sea, God appeared to Israel as a mighty hero doing battle and at Sinai He appeared to Israel as an old man full of mercy. ‘I am the Lord your God’; I was in Egypt and I am He who was at the Sea; I am He who was at Sinai. I am He who was in the past and I will be in the future. I am He who is in this world and I am He who will be in the world to come.... Till you grow old, I will still be the same...I am the first and I am the last; *AniAdonay* – I am the Lord.”

We change, God's labels and our assumptions of God change, but God never changes!

In discussing why we have difficulty in harmonizing personal beliefs with assumptions and labels of others, Rabbi Angel, writes, “We fail...because we don't take control of our lives, we don't have the will-power to make decisions and to act

on them. We drift along in our routines, hoping that ‘with the Lord’s help’ we’ll change our pattern for the better in the future.” My friends, for change to happen, we must always seek our own truth and make our own way, for only then can God's name be honored and our hearts true.

As the new year of 5772 unfolds, we pray that it and we will be filled with blessings, dreams and goals to be realized. May we have the courage to turn away from labels of yesteryear and the false assumptions of others as we search for the truths that will speak to our souls, our spirits and our minds. May we become, not just 'believers', but doers, living the teachings of God and following the truths of our hearts in the days ahead.

Ken y’hiratzon –may it be God’s will – amen.