

There Are no Atheists in Foxholesⁱ

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Beth Shalom Congregation
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Shabbat Shalom

It's said, "There are no atheists in a foxhole."

An atheist is a good SAT word that means someone who does not believe God exists. And a foxhole is a hole that a soldier crouches in when under fire from the enemy.

"There are no atheists in a foxhole" means that when you are being shot at by someone who wants you dead, no matter what you might believe in a rational moment, no matter what you might have believed in the previous moments of your life, this moment, when you are scared for your life, one of the few things you can hold onto is the belief that there IS a Higher Power looking over you, looking out for you, that there is a God who cares what happens to you and that faith, that belief, will give you the strength to soldier on.

That is what my father learned when he was in World War II.

He was a young torpedo man on a PT boat in the Pacific. But the Navy in its wisdom landed him and his crew and other young men on an island in the Philippines. They were told to hold the island. It was supposed to be empty, abandoned by the Japanese. So they dug rudimentary foxholes. They were really foxholes in name only, just little indents in the ground, enough to lay in or curl in and keep your head down, enough just for two guys to maybe crouch in.

Some of you may have heard this story before. That first night on the island was broken by mortar fire. The Japanese had not abandoned the island. It was a trap and now these young men were being bombarded by mortars. My dad and the rest of the men jumped out of their make shift beds and slid into the foxholes. The sound was terrible. If the mortars didn't get you, the shrapnel flying through the air would. Most of the young men were out of their minds with fear and many got up out of their foxholes to try to run to the beach, thinking that they could get off the island that way. But every time someone got up to run, they were cut down.

My dad saw his foxhole partner try to run and get killed this way. And that is when he began to pray.

At the time of this battle, I don't think my dad was even 17-years-old yet, much younger than his other navy peers, and not much older than Joseph is in our Torah reading, parsha Vayeshev, this morning. And like Joseph, God didn't play too much role in his life up to this point, at least from his point of view.

Sure my dad had a Bar Mitzvah. His parents were nominally Orthodox and his mother lit candles every Friday night with the large brass candlesticks, her mother's candlesticks, that you may have seen in my dining room. But that was what his parents did. My dad only went to synagogue on Yom Kippur, I think to honor his dad. He was a rough scrabble kid who relied on himself. He knew how to get around and help his family out during the depression. He was not a person of faith or religious conviction per se. But during that long dark night of Japanese shelling, my dad prayed like he had never prayed before. He didn't bargain with God, as some might. He just prayed to God to get him through the night. As he prayed, he told me years later, he felt a sense of peace descend upon him. That sense of peace helped him stay put in his foxhole and he obviously lived through that night to tell the tale to my brothers and me, after being picked up the next day by the Navy.

We all know the story of Joseph and the many colored coat, how he receives prophetic dreams as a young man and ticks his brothers off when he gloats over them, as Joe so ably explained in his Devar Torah introduction. But did you notice anything strange about those stories? Joseph seems to believe

that the dreams are messages, that they are prophecies in some way, but he never, ever in these scenes with his brother, ever credits God for sending these dreams, or helping him understand them.

It is not until Joseph has spent considerable time in prison, perhaps years in prison, not until we read about him next week, that we see that Joseph has changed. Next week we will see that when he interprets Pharaoh's dreams, he credits God as the sender of the dreams and the One who makes the dreams understandable to him.

Why did he start *at this point* in his life giving credit to God for a skill -- his ability to interpret dreams -- that he had always had? Perhaps because the experience of being locked up, fearful, perhaps hopeless, changed him. He turned to the God of his fathers when there was no one else to turn to. There are no atheists in foxholes.

Thank God, God doesn't hold grudges. God doesn't hold it against us that we don't call on God, thank God, think of God when things are going well. God waits with open arms like a loving parent to comfort us when we are hurting and strengthen us when we are afraid.

My father believed and I think Joseph believed that God is not a vending machine Who provides us with our wants, our needs, and our desires, even if those desires are good and just, like stopping vicious people from doing harm to others. But my father believed and I think Joseph believed that God can provide us the inner strength to get through that which we cannot otherwise think we can get through. That is what my father experienced in the foxhole and I think that is what Joseph experienced in prison.

As a result of his foxhole experience, my father began to see things differently. He went from seeing what he had, what he got, and what he got away with as luck or what was due him to seeing everything as a gift from God, a reason to be thankful, and thus a reason to pass that goodness forward to others as much as he was able. He spent the rest of his life helping people - family and friends, neighbors, strangers. He spent the rest of his life being thankful to God for his life and for everything he enjoyed.

I think Joseph also began to see things differently after his prison experience. I think he also went from seeing what he had, what he got, and what he got away with as luck or what was due him to seeing everything as a gift from God, a reason to be thankful, and thus a reason to pass goodness forward to others. As he rises to a position of prominence in Egypt, he ensures that everyone, even the poor, have grain to eat. And he passes that sense of gratitude and goodness on to his children. How do I know? Because his sons Menashe and Ephraim, are the very first siblings in the Torah about whom there is not one word written of tension, friction, or competition. True gratitude, soul-deep appreciation for what we have and to God Who provides it all, is transformative: it shifts our focus from what we don't have to what we do have, from what others can do for us to what we can do for others, and especially from the self-pity of why is this happening to me to the confidence that with God's help I can get through this.

There are no atheists in foxholes. It's true. But hopefully we won't have to find ourselves in a foxhole or a prison before we shift our focus to see all that God has wrought for our sakes, to appreciate all that God has given us, to name these blessings and thank God for them, and see how we can use these blessings to do God's work in the world helping others. When we shift our focus in this way, in my father's way, in Joseph's way, then there is nothing we and God can't get through together. Shabbat Shalom.