

God, Hurricanes and Charlottesvilleⁱ

A Sermon for Kol Nidre
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Shanah Tovah

Our Jewish year 5777 ended eventfully. First, we witnessed torch carrying white supremacists chanting, “Jews will not replace us. Blacks will not replace us,” through the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. Many of us were disturbed not only by the specter of Nazis and KKK on American streets but also by the lack of immediate and universal condemnation of them.

Just a few weeks later, three hurricanes in a row devastated parts of Texas, Florida, Puerto Rico and the rest of the Caribbean. Despite the loss of life and property, the havoc wrecked on so many families, something amazing happened: We came together as a nation to help.

What is it about a calamity that brings out the best in us? Is it that the realization, “There but for the grace of God go I” inspires our empathy and generosity? Is it that the spark of goodness I believe God planted within each of us somehow awakens in the face of tragedy?

There are many things I could say about the intolerance evident in Charlottesville and how we might respond to it. There are many things I could say about the increasing frequency of extreme weather, like the recent hurricanes, and how we might mitigate it.

But I am not going to speak about these things tonight. I spoke on Rosh Hashanah about how speaking with those with whom we disagree can make a difference and how our inner hero calls us to fight for the world we know can be, a world of love. I have spoken often in the past about our responsibility for the world entrusted to our care.

Tonight, on this holiest of nights, I want to speak with you about God. The God we can believe in. The God we don’t believe in. And how what we believe may make a difference in how we respond to the challenges we face in our divided, divisive, and often dangerous world.

A story is told about the great Hasidic master, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev and an atheist who lived in his town. One day, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak met this man and said to him, “I hear you do not believe in God.” The man replied defensively, “That is true.” “Well,” Rabbi Levi Yitzhak gently continued, “I would like to hear more. Perhaps the God you don’t believe in is the same God I don’t believe in.”

Perhaps the God *you* don’t believe in is also the same God *I* don’t believe in.

Many people claim to speak for God, to know God’s will and act on it. There are Christian white supremacists and Muslim extremists who claim that the God they believe in has no room for anyone who does not believe or look or act exactly like they do. There are even some Jewish extremists who believe that and don’t consider *us* Jews. (Thankfully, Jewish extremists are a very small part of our People, though we have to do our part to make sure they remain so.)

The fact is, we *don’t* believe in the God they believe in, a God they think tells them to open their hearts *only* to those who are like them, those who completely agree with them. Their position doesn’t even make sense. If God wanted us to care only about those like us, why did

God create a world with people of different hair, eye, and skin colors; different languages, cultures, and beliefs?

Our holy Torah records that all humanity is descended from one first couple, Adam and Eve. Our ancient Rabbis explain that this comes to teach us that no one's blood is redder than another's. God created us all equal. Our ancient Rabbis offered this analogy: While coins minted from the same mold by a human king all look alike, humans minted from the same mold by our holy King, God, are each different. The fact that we are created equal *and* different proves God's miraculous nature.

My friends, we believe in a God who is Creator of all the different peoples of the world. We believe in a God Who loves all God's children and judges us not by our faith but by our deeds. The righteous among the nations all have a place in heaven.

Listen to this story from the dark days of the Holocaust about one such righteous among the nations, the Jew he learned empathy from, and the Jew he helped because of that lesson.

When the Nazis took over their town of Dej near Transylvania, Rabbi Paneth, his wife, and their eight children escaped into the forest. They did their best to hide by day and travel by night. They found an abandoned silo to give them shelter. They had not eaten for two days.

"We have to go out to try to find some food," Mrs. Paneth told her husband. "What is worse, to die of a gunshot or of hunger?" Already dressed in peasant garb for their journey, Mrs. Paneth and her eldest son Moshe headed out, hoping their disguise would protect them. They saw two peasants working a field. As they continued to walk casually, Mrs. Paneth studied them. One was tall, neatly dressed. He seemed to stand out so she approached him boldly and asked, "Do you have God in your heart?" The man flinched and then looked the two of them over. Grasping their predicament, he said, "Good woman... Don't worry I won't give you away." She explained, "My children are suffering so much. They have not eaten in two days. Can you help us?"

He replied, "Where are you hiding? I will send my wife home to fill a basket with food... My name is Tarnowan and I am the village minister and judge. I won't turn you in."

Mrs. Paneth and her son returned to the silo and explained what happened and how she thought she could trust this man.

True to his word, Tarnowan soon appeared accompanied by his wife with baskets of food. On their arrival, Rabbi Paneth jumped to his feet to thank him. "You are saving our lives. I understand you are Judge Tarnowan. My name is Yosef Paneth."

The Rabbi noted the man's strange reaction. "May I ask your father's name?" Tarnowan asked.

"Rabbi Yechezkel Paneth," the Rabbi answered. Tarnowan turned white as a sheet. Trembling he began to explain: "Twenty years ago, my two-year-old son became deathly ill. Everyone we consulted said there was no hope. Then I heard about a very holy rabbi in Dej. Being religious myself, I had no qualms about approaching a rabbi for a blessing. When I arrived in Dej, I was directed to a building surrounded by many students. I approached one young man and asked if the rabbi could give my son a blessing. The student told me he would go inside to see what could be done. He returned a few minutes later with a personal message from the rabbi: 'Your son is going to be well. One thing I want you to promise. Whenever you see people in trouble, help them.' My son immediately began to recover. In Rabbi Paneth's memory, I will do all I can to help you."

Judge Tarnowan hid the family for two weeks. When the Nazis began searching the forest, he moved them to his cousin's house farther away. The Paneths survived the war because

two people, the elder Rabbi Paneth and the younger Judge Tarnowan, had God in their hearts and thus saw all human beings, especially those different than them, as God's children equally worthy of help.

The God we believe in is a God of love and empathy.

You might object: if God is a God of love and empathy, why does God allow natural disasters, disease, and human viciousness to occur? It is a good question, one our people have been asking for millennia. Rabbi Harold Kushner puts it this way: where is God when bad things happen to good people?

You know the saying, ask two Jews a question, get three answers. Let me offer you three answers I find compelling.

One answer, from the great Jewish philosopher and rabbi Moses Maimonides, is that God is the God of Creation, the Prime Mover Who placed the heavens in their courses and set all life in balance on earth. God gave us an instruction manual (the Torah) for how to keep the world and human society in good working order and then handed us the keys to the car, so to speak. Now we are on our own with both the free will and the responsibility for cleaning up any accidents caused by our careless, aggressive, or distracted driving.

Another answer is from my friend Rabbi Kushner, who lost his son to a terrible childhood illness and believes, based on painful personal experience, that God is the strength that helps us through that which we could never get through on our own.

Another answer is from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, himself a refugee from Nazi Germany, who writes that the God of Israel, the God of the Hebrew prophets, is a God of empathy who demands empathy of us. That is why, on the day when Rabbi Heschel had to catch a train to Selma, Alabama to join Dr. Martin Luther King, he explained to a perplexed student, questioning where he was going since it was time for the afternoon prayers, that he was going to pray with his feet. For Rabbi Heschel, God is the Empathy that motivates us to help others.

According to biblical scholar Yehezkiel Kaufman, what made faith in the God of Israel so revolutionary was not the belief in one God instead of many. It was the belief in one Ultimate Moral Arbitor, who demands of us ethical action and without whom all morality would be arbitrary or relative to self-interest and convenience.

You might remember the Hebrew National ad, "We answer to a Higher Authority." Indeed, we are answering to that Higher Authority tonight in our prayers. We believe in a God who holds us morally accountable not just today but every day. As Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi put it in *Ethics of the Fathers*: "Know what is above you: a seeing eye, a listening ear, and all your deeds are inscribed in a book." We write what is in that book every day with our deeds.

The idea that there is an Ultimate Moral Authority who expects us to treat everyone with empathy is such a revolutionary concept that it is still not universally accepted, judging by what happened in Charlottesville this summer. To have God truly in our hearts is not a test of faith but of moral action, a test of our willingness to act as God expects us to, particularly in how we treat others.

My friends, so much is blamed on God that really shouldn't be.

Maybe you know the joke about the man who refuses to evacuate when the police warn him a flood is coming. He insists God will save him. As the water rises above his first floor, a coast guard boat comes to evacuate him. He again refuses, insisting God will save him. As the water rises to his roof, a National Guard helicopter comes to rescue him and again he refuses, insisting God will save him. He ultimately drowns. When he gets to heaven, he angrily asks why

didn't God save him. God answers, "What are you complaining about? I sent you a police car, a boat and a helicopter!"

My friends, the God you don't believe in is probably the same God I don't believe in. I don't believe in a God who brings hurricanes. I don't believe in a judgmental, tit for tat, vengeful God who embraces an "in group" while condemning an "out group" or commands someone to kill in God's name.

I believe in a God who motivates us to help, who guides and supports those facing trouble and heartbreaking challenge, who strengthens the weary, particularly all the first responders who continue to do a tremendous job rescuing and sheltering so many hurricane victims. I believe in a God who cares about us and the world and gave us a set of good rules (the Torah) *and* the spark of goodness within each of us to make wise decisions and act with love and empathy.

I have some radical and, maybe welcome, news for you: You don't have to believe in God, at all, to be a good Jew or a good person. I know because I am married to an atheist who is both a good Jew and a good person.

Our ancient Rabbis taught that we are not judged by our faith but by our deeds, which is why everyone who does good deeds, regardless of whether or not they believe in God, whether or not they are even Jewish, go to heaven. Ironically, our ancient Rabbis taught that each of us should have at least a little bit of the atheist in us, otherwise we might wait around, like our friend in the joke, for God to make a miracle for us rather than take care of ourselves and others.

Don't get me wrong. While God judges us by our deeds and condemns extremist faith and empty ritual, faith and ritual *are* important—otherwise God would not have commanded them of us. Ideally, faith allows us to hold God in our hearts as a touchstone to guide us along a moral path and as a Higher Power to support us in times of pain, danger and dread. Ideally, Jewish ritual enriches our lives with a sense of balance and reinforces the very values I and Rabbi Heschel believe God intends us to act upon in the world, the kind of values that build the world we know can be, a world of love and empathy.

Jewish faith and ritual have an incredibly important role in strengthening our Jewish identity and building our Jewish knowledge so we can best fulfill our God given task to serve as *Or HaGoyim*, a light unto the nations, spreading the message of love for all God's creatures.

We practice these values of love and empathy each week when we make the Sabbath special, remembering that it is not just a day of rest for ourselves, and our family and friends but also for our servants and workers, because all God's children deserve to be treated with dignity, empathy and respect. We practice these values when we observe the kosher laws that require humane slaughtering, not eating blood and refraining from certain animals completely, remembering that even animals deserve our empathy, that all life is precious, and that we can control our lust for what we want or think we need. These two *mitzvot*, the traditions of Shabbat and *kashrut*, have defined us as Jews, guided us as Jews, since our earliest days as an identifiable people.

I have some more surprising news for you. You don't *have* to believe in God to observe and enjoy Jewish ritual. I would argue that to be a Jew is an identity of deed, not just "feeling." Feeling Jewish, identifying publicly as a Jew is great, like some Jewish celebrities have been doing since Charlottesville. But feeling Jewish is not sufficient if we are to keep the sacred trust established with our ancestors and passed down to us and our children's children, to remember our sacred mission to fight for the world that can be a world of love.

My friends, this is perhaps the most tragic news: if we don't *do* Jewish, we soon won't remember our sacred task in the world. Then we will do for the anti-Semites what they have not been able to do to us throughout the centuries: eliminate us and thus silence us as the conscience of empathy and love in the world.

So much of the violence in the world is driven by those claiming to speak in God's name. It is up to us not just to defend ourselves and helpless others but to defend God's role in the world. I believe that what *we* believe about God *can* make a difference in responding to the challenges we face in our divided, divisive, and often dangerous world.

I believe in a God who is the Power within us that motivates us to help and enables us to go on when we can't imagine how. I believe in a God who blesses us when we say the blessing over the Sabbath challah bread *and* when we show kindness to strangers. I believe in a God who loves all people equally *and* loves the Jewish People by giving us special responsibilities in our broken world, to stand up against hate, and fight for the world we know can be a world of love. I believe in a God who expects us not to wait for an anti-Semitic rally or a hurricane before we step in to intervene or step up to help.

That is the God I believe in. I look forward to hearing about the God you believe in, or could possibly believe in, in the coming year. Stop by. Make an appointment. Join my class this fall on the "Origins of Jewishness" or next spring on "What We Believe." Let's talk. You don't have to believe in God to be a good Jew or a good person. But perhaps the God you don't believe in is also the God I don't believe in.

Shanah Tovah.

ⁱ © Copyright. Rabbi Susan Grossman. 2017. My appreciation to the 6th and 7th grade parents who participated in my Judaism and Java parent discussion and the congregants who participated in the discussion of this fall's Selihot movie, *The Quarrel*, whose questions stimulated this sermon.