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**Kol Nidre 5785 - “Cause I Gotta Have Faith”<sup>1</sup>**

On Rosh Hashanah,  
I stood before you all and spoke about the importance of hope.

I spoke of the Jewish legacy of hope and the role it has played in ensuring our survival through unimaginable periods of our history, including the one in which we currently find ourselves.

I spoke of the responsibility of the Jewish people to not relinquish hope, especially when it feels most tempting to do just that, especially when it seems we have little ostensible reason to hold onto it.

And yet,  
as I reread my own words,  
I recognized that one particular word was conspicuously missing from the narrative.

**I spoke quite a great deal about hope,  
without a single mention of the word “faith.”**

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In some ways,  
hope is easier to access.

Hope implies anticipation,

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<sup>1</sup> From the song “Faith” by George Michael

desire,  
expectation for what *could* be.

Faith,  
on the other hand,  
implies belief,  
trust,  
conviction for what currently is.

Hope doesn't require certainty,  
it just requires imagination,  
the ability to see potential and imagine it could come true.

Hope is easier to talk about.

**There's a reason I chose to focus last week's sermon on hope instead of faith.**

And yet,  
it's not a word we can shy away from.  
Faith is one of those words that is used synonymously with religion -  
Judaism is our particular "faith tradition."  
We are "people of faith."

So,  
then,  
why is it so hard to talk about it?

Why does it seem that other religious groups are able to speak more freely about  
*faith* than we are?

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For many of us,

the concept of faith might imply ignoring or disregarding fact or science or modern ideas in favor of religious doctrine or myth.

To speak about faith might seem irrational or illogical.

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And yet,  
in a Jewish context,  
contrary to the misconceptions we might be holding,  
faith is not reserved only for those who accept religious doctrine as sacrosanct.

Faith,  
in Judaism,  
does not require turning a blind eye to the horrors of this world,  
nor necessarily believing that they are all part of some ultimately good Divine plan.

For Jews,  
being a person of faith does not mean accepting a specific theology or way of thinking and disavowing anything that challenges it.

**Being a person of faith means *believing* that our very existence is a miracle.**

**It means being open-hearted enough to *engage* with truths about our existence and this universe that are *fundamentally unknowable*.**

Dr. Alan Morinis, founder of the Mussar Institute, reminds us that  
“**faith is not so much something *held* as *pursued*.**”<sup>2</sup>

And, as Rabbi Eliyahu Lopian taught, “the body needs air.

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<sup>2</sup> Morinis, Alan. Every Day. Holy Day. p. 155

[And] what is the air of the soul?

**Faith.”<sup>3</sup>**

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**So, in what exactly are we asked to place our faith?**

Core to understanding **faith** in a Jewish context is grappling with our own conceptions and misconceptions of the Divine.

Despite the metaphors you read in this *machzor* tonight,  
despite the images of God that may be swirling around in your mind,  
our tradition truly does not see God as a personified man in the sky but rather as  
the ineffable,  
eternal source of all that was,  
is,  
and will be.

It has often been noted that the word we read aloud as “HaShem,”  
or “Adonai,”  
is unpronounceable.

This four letter word that scholars call the tetragrammaton is made up of the  
letters Yud,  
Hey,  
Vav,  
and Hey.

Contained within this unpronounceable,  
mystical name is the word for what was (היה),  
what is (הווה),  
and what will be (יהיה).

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*

We don't have an image or a consensus for what this thing spelled YUD HEY VAV HEY actually is, but we do know that it's ETERNAL.

Dr. Morinis notes that "we refer to this source as HaShem, 'the Name,' signaling that we cannot hope to name the unnamable."<sup>4</sup>

So then, "**the issue,**"  
as Rabbi Paul Kipnes explains,  
**is not whether we believe in God.**

**It does not matter.**

**Because God just Is-Was-Will-Be.**

**The question,**  
**instead, [he writes,]**  
**should be whether we are willing to open our eyes,**  
**our minds,**  
**and our hearts to the continuously sacred flow of Existence."**<sup>5</sup>

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In the context of the political landscape in which we currently find ourselves, this might not feel like the most crucial matter at hand.

It might seem to be of secondary importance, this exercise in faith.

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<sup>4</sup> ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "On God," from Honoring Tradition, Embracing Modernity: A Reader for the Union for Reform Judaism's Introduction to Judaism Course. p. 356

Hope might feel hard enough -

Is it even worth the energy to take it one step further and identify ourselves not just as part of the Jewish people but actually as people of faith?

**And yet just imagine what it could mean for our communities,  
for our people,  
and for this very broken world if we actually were willing to open our eyes,  
minds,  
and hearts to “the continuously sacred flow of Existence.”**

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**To be a person of Faith in Judaism thankfully does not require agreement with one dominant theology.**

Some of us have faith in a God who takes an active role in our lives,  
a personal,  
imminent God.

Some of us believe in a transcendent God,  
an impersonal force that permeates every molecule of existence but does not  
engage in an active,  
attentive relationship with human beings.

Some of us believe,  
as Martin Buber taught,  
that there is no external, supernatural, omniscient God.  
Rather, God is simply what emerges in the electricity between two people when  
they truly glimpse the other’s essence and engage in authentic,  
deep connection.

**Faith is not believing in one of these concepts more than another.**

All the conceptions of God we can point to are metaphors,

human derived,  
and this day of Yom Kippur is chock-full of them.

God as Avinu -  
our father.

God as Malkeinu -  
our king.

God “hayoshev al kiseh ram v’nisa” -  
the one who sits on a high and exalted throne.

God as the scribe who writes our names in books of life and death.

God as the judge who issues sentences and decrees based on our behavior.

And so it must be stated and restated:  
The One we call HASHEM has no gender,  
has no body,  
has no furniture to sit on,  
no pen to write with,  
no books to fill,  
no gavel to bang,  
and inhabits no library or courtroom.

**These are human images,  
human metaphors drafted for human brains.**

Rav Kook,  
the first Chief Rabbi in the land of Israel under the British Mandate,  
wrote that “all the divine names,  
whether in Hebrew or in any other language,

give us only a tiny and dull spark of the hidden light to which the soul aspires when it utters the word 'God.'

Every definition of God brings about heresy,  
every definition is spiritual idolatry;  
even attributing to [God] intellect and will,  
even the term *divine*,  
the term *God*,  
suffers from the limitations of definition.”<sup>6</sup>

When our liturgy invites these words to infiltrate our mouths and our minds, they exist exclusively as metaphorical tools intended not to be understood literally,  
but rather to slap us in the face and wake us up.

**We don't have faith in the *metaphors* of Yom Kippur,  
we have faith in the *truths* that underlie the stories -  
the **truth** that none of us knows how much time we have left on this earth,  
that none of us knows how much time we have left with our loved ones.**

We have **faith** in the necessity of the task at hand this Yom Kippur -  
in the task of becoming the person we want to be for our loved ones *now*,  
of becoming the person we want to be for ourselves *now*.

**“God” is the word for the voice that whispers that truth in our ear.**

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“God” is the placeholder word because the “Eternal,  
All-Encompassing,

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<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, “The Pangs of Cleansing,” in *Abraham Isaac Kook*, trans. Ben Zion Bokser (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 261-62. Found in [Everyday Holiness](#) by Alan Morinis, p. 225



Transformative Power of the Universe” is simply too much to say and too much to comprehend.

But whatever word you use,  
whatever metaphor you employ,  
**Faith** comes from understanding that “thEternal, All-Encompassing Transformative Power of the Universe” is very, very real.

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**Faith means that we believe there is more to the world than what we can know and see.**

**Faith means that we are not the end-all-be-all of this universe, that there is something greater than us.**

This kippah on my head is a reminder to the world that I am proudly Jewish but, of equal importance, it is a reminder to myself that I am not the top of the pyramid – **we are not the highest level of existence.**

**And therefore we have a responsibility to walk this world with humility, empathy, gratitude, and awe.**

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Our rabbis devised their conceptions of the Source and developed names to help us connect.

We have that same power.

Maybe the images in this book work for you as they have worked for generations of Jews before us.

Maybe you struggle with the images in this book,  
as generations of Jews before us have struggled.

Either way,  
the stakes are too high to forget the truths they are trying to teach us if we don't take the metaphors too literally -  
that we are connected to something greater than ourselves, and so *what we say and do matters,*  
*that we have a responsibility to others, because our futures are interconnected and interdependent,*  
*and that, unlike God, we are not eternal; the clock is ticking.*

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We cannot give up the metaphors and the images in our liturgy, whether they are literally true or not.

They are a part of what has sustained our people,  
alongside the hope that I spoke about on Rosh Hashanah.

We cannot give up the fundamental idea we recite in the *shema* twice a day -  
"Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad" -  
What we call "God" is that which was/is/always will be,  
that which was/is/always will be is a very real sense of ultimate unity,  
absolute oneness.

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Being a person of faith is not about inventing fairy tales to help us cope with the horrors of our current reality,  
it does not mean imagining a sense of order where there is none.

It means opening our eyes and acknowledging the order that actually exists,  
the unity when we are seeing only division,  
the goodness when we experience evil,  
the power when we feel most helpless,  
the light that exists and has always existed, even when it feels so unbearably dark.

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Our tradition has never been for tradition's sake alone -  
the sacred obligations,  
the holidays,  
the liturgy,  
the customs,  
all of it.

It's not just something we do because our ancestors did it.

This was our ancestors' ways of inculcating a sense of **faith**,  
a belief and closeness to that which is beyond the rational,  
beyond time,  
greater than ourselves.

These words,  
these traditions,  
these holidays exist to get us back to a place of faith,  
to faith in this thing we might call HASHEM (the name),  
or EIN SOF (the endless),

or HAMAKOM (the place),  
or God,  
whatever you call it,  
Faith that it exists,  
that we are not alone,  
that we are loved.

**That is faith and we need it now more than ever,  
lest we give into the illusion,  
the disillusionment,  
that we are helpless and alone.**

**We are not helpless and we are not alone.**

That's why we're here tonight,  
not only to connect to each other and feel like we are a part of the broader Jewish  
community at a time when we need it most,  
but also to connect to a life-giving source that Jews have been hungry for and  
arguing about and trying to wrap our minds around for thousands of years.

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This year,  
don't let skepticism prevent you from accessing faith in that which is good,  
which is true,  
which is Eternal and all-encompassing.

May our faith lead us to a sense of unity,  
a sense of love and trust,  
and,  
in the most Jewish way,  
may it always inspire further questions.

**May we never forget that "Faith is the air of the soul."**

May our souls breathe in a faith that is complicated, but sustaining and inspiring and grounding.

In 5785, may we hold onto our hope.

And may it inspire us to truly call ourselves people of faith.