



Hopes and Doubts: Torah Reflections for the High Holiday and Yizkor Season

For many of us sitting in the pews this High Holiday season listening to solemn proclamations about who shall be inscribed into the Book of Life, and who shall not, doubts and skepticism may once again creep into our minds about the nature, power, and even wisdom and justice of God. After all, it's usually just theologians or philosophers who have the professional luxury dwell on questions of divinity all day every day, not just a few times a year. But they too sometimes have their doubts, so don't feel bad. What we, as congregants, often struggle with, however, is that very tension which exists in that doubt. "Do I believe?" "I think I should believe, but feel nagging guilt that I don't." "I'm moved emotionally by the service, yet feel angry that my loved has died." A myriad of other apparent internal conflicts can, and often do, afflict us in the midst of a holiday that calls on us to be afflicted-- though that affliction is guided by the tradition mostly in other directions.

And in the midst of this doubt and questioning we come to Yizkor, that part of the service on Yom Kippur in which we remember those who died as we give merit to the souls in their journey forward through the afterlife. For the vast body of rationalists among us this idea, though ensconced in the Jewish tradition, may also make us feel uneasy. At the same time the sacred moment may also remind us of how we dearly miss the person, and long to feel close to them, to connect with them, to know if she or he has any awareness of what is happening to us or our family today. It's a tender and emotional time. Yet how do we reconcile our longing with the rational part of our mind which has been pulling us in another direction? There is perhaps a fairly simple answer; and not all solutions need to be complex. Briefly put: acknowledge the doubt, and also embrace the hope.

In this culture we are trained to think in dualities and dichotomies. It has to be either/or, rather than both/and. Yet a both/and mode of thinking often helps to explain many things. It enables us to understand something that we initially thought was a conflict but is in fact part of a unified, yet maybe complex, whole. Along that line, we don't have to shut out the doubts and skepticism-- just the reverse. Recognize and acknowledge them. They are a part of who we are, our education, our intelligence. At the same time we are also emotional beings, with feelings and sentiments, and even intuitions and senses that function at all levels of our being. If we long to connect with someone who died, then indulge that feeling. Just as we embrace our reason, so too can we embrace our emotion and other senses. They are valid aspects of who we are. One is not always necessarily better than the other, and each has their function and place. Both can be errant, and both can be spot on.

(over, please)

During the high holidays, and particularly Yom Kippur, we are called upon to enter a higher spiritual plane-- to achieve a sense of what Jewish mystics called "devekut"-- adherence, or oneness with the divine, or some approximation thereof. That attempt at unity is sometimes accompanied by a transcendent appreciation of the unity of all life and experience. Perhaps during this holiday season, in addition to fasting and other practices of self-denial which are meant to raise us above the material world and bring us closer to the divine, we also might look again within ourselves and recognize the unity of our own being. Reason and doubt and hope and longing are intertwined within us. The affliction of the holiday should not be fighting unnecessary internal conflicts. If on this occasion we long to connect with a loved one who has died, then maybe for some of us the Days of Awe may be an opportunity to practice acknowledging the many dimensions of who we are, and embrace those powers within us which will bring us closer to the ones we miss.

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Rosh Hashanah and the Hebrew year 5777 begins at sundown on October 2, 2016; the Yizkor service for Yom Kippur is on October 12th.



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