



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5773 • 2012

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

October 1, 2012

Sukkot Day 2

**Shadow of Faith:
Are You an Atheist?**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Are you a believer, an agnostic or an atheist? For that matter – the more important and preceding question should be – what exactly is faith? Is it a childish belief in fairytales, is it a crutch and absence of reason, or is something else entirely? How many people who proclaim to be people of faith are anything but? Witnessing religious fanaticism one has to wonder whether faith could even be a destructive force.

The self-proclaimed atheist and the rabbi ... the thief who prays to God to help him success in his work ... the Rebbe who put everything on the line in the name of his faith – which some would coolly dismiss as belief in the “radical immanence of God” – all help us learn the difference between faith and farce.

Filled with anecdotes and stories about atheists, agnostics and believers – this sermon shows us how the sukkah, which is called the “shadow of faith,” offers us an opportunity to revisit our faith and to discover how faith is one of the most powerful resources we have, if only we know how to use it and to integrate into our personal lives.

Shadow of Faith

1. Atheist or Ignoramus? (Humor)

ATwo brothers were arguing.

"You say you are an atheist, and you believe in nothing?"

"Exactly. I can only believe in something I understand."

"Well, that certainly explains why you believe in nothing."

*

Rabbi Izel Harif, the noted sage of Slonim, was visited by a worldly young man who fancied himself a firm atheist.

"Before one can accept or reject any philosophy, he must first be familiar with the main thesis," the rabbi said. "Do you agree?"

"Of course," the young cynic agreed readily.

"Then let me ask you, have you mastered the Torah?"

"Well, I wouldn't go so far as to say I have mastered it. I read a little of the Bible when I was preparing for my Bar Mitzvah, but that was years ago."

"And the Talmud?"

"Oh, come now, Rabbi! Nobody reads the Talmud anymore!"

"Then how about our great Jewish philosophers?" Rabbi Harif persisted, his eyes glinting. "Have you studied, for example, Maimonides or Yehudah HaLevi?"

"I never heard of them?"

"My dear fellow," sighed the rabbi, "you are not familiar with the Torah, you know nothing of the Talmud, and you never heard of our Jewish philosophers. Yet you have the temerity to call yourself a disbeliever? Young man, you are not an atheist, you are an ignoramus."¹

¹ Adapted from *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor* by Henry D. Spalding, pp. 60-61.

2. Atheists or Agnostics (Optional)

Frankly, I never got those atheists who are sure God does not exist.

Agnostics are easy to understand. I can see how someone has doubts and is unsure whether God exists. But how can one be absolutely sure that God does *not* exist? This kind of irrational conviction can sound awfully like blind faith.

I understand that a person may emotionally choose not to believe in God, but that should not be confused with an absolute belief that God does not exist. Indeed, no one can prove that God does not exist, as no one can absolutely prove that God exists.² Arguments can be made either way, but the final conclusion is not driven by logic. For believers, it is driven by faith. For atheists, it is driven by ... what? Ego?

A story is told about a philosopher who was arguing with a respected rabbi about the existence of God. After a time, the philosopher grew exasperated. "You are a wise man," he said to the rabbi. "Why is it that you are not moved by all the arguments disputing God's existence?"

The rabbi smiled. "I envy you," he said to the philosopher. "Because you are so involved in pondering the existence of God, you are always thinking about Him, while I spend most of my time thinking about myself." With that, they parted ways.

The philosopher was flattered by the rabbi's remarks, yet disturbed that his question was never answered. Later, as he was telling a friend about the encounter, the deeper meaning of the rabbi's words dawned on him.

² In 1934 Karl Popper, the Austrian-British philosopher of science, famously propounded the idea that a scientific hypothesis must be falsifiable. What makes it scientific is the fact that it can conceivably be proved wrong. For example, the statement "God exists" is not a scientific hypothesis because it is not susceptible to disproof. He writes in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959), "Science is not a system of certain, or well-established, statements; nor is it a system which steadily advances towards a state of finality. Our science is not knowledge: it can never claim to have attained truth, or even a substitute for it, such as probability... *We do not know: we can only guess.* And our guesses are guided by the unscientific, the metaphysical (though biologically explicable) faith in laws, in regularities we can uncover/discover... The old scientific ideal of episteme – of absolutely certain, demonstrable knowledge – has proved to be an idol. The demand for scientific objectivity makes it inevitable that every scientific statement must remain *tentative for ever....*"

"The rabbi actually insulted me," he said to the friend. "The reason I spend all my time pondering God's existence is that I am sure that I exist. For the rabbi, God's existence is a given, so the eternal question is whether he exists, and if so, why?"

3. Religious Zealotry

If the *New York Times* is right, the last couple of weeks – Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur notwithstanding – have given birth to many more atheists, agnostics and non-believers.

It seems that whenever the world is shaken by violent acts of religious fanaticism – like 9/11, for example – people are apt to feel disgust with religious zealotry in any form and discard whatever faith they happen to profess.³

And, of course, in the past couple of weeks, we have seen a frightening display of such zealotry in response to a video – posted on YouTube by a Coptic Christian – mocking Mohammad and Islam. After a week of terror that saw four Americans dead and American embassies throughout the Muslim world overrun by angry mobs, there are bound to be more atheists in the world today.

But what about us Jews?

Are our convictions also so easily shaken?

³ The New York Times, August 22, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/26/magazine/from-bible-belt-pastor-to-atheist-leader.html?pagewanted=3&ref=magazine&pagewanted=print>

4. Confused Jews (Optional)

At times, it might seem so.

When Rabbi Amy Morrison of Miami Beach invited her youthful congregation to text – yes, text – during Rosh Hashana services in order to post their thoughts on a large screen over the *bima*, one of the messages read: “I don’t believe in God. Too much suffering.”⁴

Well, to young confused Jews like this one, I’d like to quote the famous words of Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev, “The god you don’t believe in, I don’t believe in either.”

If you believe in a deity that visits punishment and suffering upon the world – and is somehow responsible for the Nazi genocide or for marauding mobs of Islamic fundamentalists – well, I’m with you there. I believe in a different God altogether.

And it is to this God – the God of Israel – that I am even more likely to turn when the world goes awry.

As one survivor stated, when asked by an atheist how he could believe in God after the Holocaust, “If anything, the Holocaust taught us that we no longer can believe in man, and our only hope is to rely on God.”

And faith and reliance in God is what Sukkot is all about – indeed, the sukkah is called the “shadow of faith.”

5. Shadow of Faith

[It’s an apt topic to ponder during Sukkot, for the sukkah is called the “shadow of faith.”]

We sit in the sukkah – a little hut with a make-shift roof of reeds, branches or palm fronds – to assert our faith in God, to demonstrate that we are totally dependent on him and that our seemingly sturdy man-made shelters are nothing in the absence of His care.

⁴The New York Times, September 17, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/18/us/for-young-jews-a-service-says-please-do-text.html?nl=todaysheadlines&emc=edit_th_20120918

Writes the Zohar:

When we sit in the sukkah of the shadow of faith, God's Presence (the *Shechinah*) spreads its wings over us from above ... And Abraham and the five righteous ones, and David with them, make their abode with us. We should rejoice each day of the festival with these guests who abide with us.⁵

One of the reasons we invite these guests – or *ushpizin* as they are called – is because they are the ones who, by their courageous actions and by the way they led their lives, have shown us what faith is all about.

And what's that you might ask?

6. What is Faith?

Faith is a choice.⁶

God created an agnostic world, in which He concealed Himself to the extent that we must struggle to discover Him.

In some mysterious way God turned reality “inside out.” He withdrew His Divine Presence in order to allow room for an independent entity to exist. He did this so well that we humans feel that we are “where it's at” and God is “out there” somewhere, when (in fact) God is “where's it's at” and the only reality that truly exists.

And this is where faith comes in.

True faith is not some blind childish acceptance of irrational beliefs. Faith is not the absence of reason; it is supra-rational. Faith is a sophisticated tool that works hand in hand with logic and reason. It is the recognition that intellectual inquiry leads one to the conclusion that reality is more than just what meets the eye. Reason leads us to glimpse the bigger picture which encompasses much more than reason itself.

And that's a feat. That's what makes faith so difficult and demanding.

⁵ Zohar III, Emor 103a.

⁶ Though every Jew is born with innate faith – indeed, we are the “faithful children of faithful” (Shabbat 97a) – we have the choice to actualize and internalize this faith, or leave it in a dormant, passive state.

7. Chassidic Thought (Optional)

Chassidic thought makes it easier.

While some are of the opinion that, when God created the world, He completely withdrew His presence, Chassidic teachings insist that He merely concealed it.

The withdrawal may appear as such from the perspective of human consciousness, for we don't feel God's revealed presence, but from God's perspective He continues to fill all of existence.⁷

This is explained in the *Tanya*, authored in the 18th century by Rabbi Shnuer Zalman of Liadi, who is also known as the Alter Rebbe.

And a story is told of how the Alter Rebbe "walked his talk," so to speak.

When the Czarist police in Russia were seeking to arrest him on the false accusation of treason, the Alter Rebbe consulted with the great Chassid, Rabbi Shmuel Munkes whether he should allow himself to be taken or go into hiding. Rabbi Shmuel unequivocally stated his opinion that the Rebbe should not resist being arrested.

"But how can you suggest that I place myself in such danger?" the Rebbe asked.

Rabbi Shmuel answered: "Because it's either or. If you are a true Rebbe then no harm will befall you. If you are not, you deserve what's coming to you for taking away the pleasure in this world from so many Jews."

The Rebbe did not resist arrest. He was taken, imprisoned for more than seven weeks and subsequently freed.⁸

This is what some may coolly dismiss as belief in the "radical immanence" of God – in the idea that God actually exists within our lives, and you either believe it completely or your faith is rendered a farce.

⁷ *Tanya*, section 2, chapter 7.

⁸ In 1778, the Alter Rebbe was accused of treason and imprisoned by the Czarist police for sending money to Jews in the Land of Israel (then in the hands of Russian's enemy, the Ottoman Empire); but on *Yud-Tes* (19th day of) Kislev he was set free. Ever since, the date has been joyfully marked by Chabad Chassidim and many others.

Faith is qualitative; it cannot be dissected into parts. Faith does not exist only when it's convenient. Either you believe that God is here with you completely, or He is completely not here. If God exists, then you have to go all the way.

When the Torah states that *ayn od melvado*,⁹ "nothing else exists but Him," it is not just waxing poetic – it is being literal.

8. Absolute Belief

Faith in God is the absolute belief that there is higher reality that we must live up to, and that this calling must permeate every aspect of our lives.

This kind of faith is not apt to be jettisoned when the world goes awry, because it means that God is actually present in our lives in a very real way. It is not just an abstract belief in some detached concept.

But this kind of faith requires constant nourishing and cultivation. It can never be taken for granted.

Indeed, there are many religious atheists and non-religious believers.

There are people who profess a lack belief in God, yet they behave like the most God-fearing people I know. Perhaps their integrity and sincerity gives them the courage to reject the false gods presented to them. Perhaps if they could discover the real God, before He was distorted by humans, they would be the firmest believers.

Then there are people who claim to be believers, and their behavior is anything but. Indeed, the Talmud¹⁰ describes a thief who prays to God before he goes out to steal! How is it possible that a person should beseech God to help him succeed in defying God's very own commandment?!

The nature of faith is such that it can remain detached from the person professing faith. Such faith is amorphous and abstract, for it has not permeated the person's behavior.

⁹ Deuteronomy 4:35.

¹⁰ Berachos 63b (Ein Yaakov).

All people believe in ideals that they don't live up to. Our ideals always exceed our actions to reach those ideals. So whether we are atheists or believers, we are all in the same boat. We all must answer the same question: Do we truly believe in our convictions and live up to them?

9. Believers and Non-Believers

Perhaps we are all both believers and non-believers. Put another way: we have two voices within – the believer in our divine soul, and the skeptic in our animal soul.

After all, God did create a pretty powerful agnostic universe, and so it's inevitable that there are areas in each of our lives where His concealment takes its toll and leaves us feeling alone and disconnected from Him.

Yet, it is not an airtight concealment, and even non-believers have their doubts. (I even know some self-proclaimed atheists that put on *tefillin* daily.)

It is true that ultimately the virtue of our lives is dependent not merely on our claims for or against religion, but on our behavior, hence the phenomenon of so-called “non-believers” being more ethical than the so-called “believers.” Yet I submit that a refined human being who also embraces God has the ability to reach much farther than the one without faith.

After all is said and done, it feels more secure to live in a world driven by faith in God than to live in a godless world. Though religion can and has been abused, atheism or agnosticism is hardly the solution.

True and healthy faith creates a platform for a life of meaning and purpose, a life in which our actions matter and our experiences are driven with direction. While a life of no belief may feel alright, it makes life a random set of circumstances, with survival of the fittest being the cardinal rule.

10. No Panacea

Religion is no panacea. History is a witness to the immeasurable misery that has been perpetrated in the name of so-called religious beliefs. Many power-hungry, corrupt individuals have simply used religion as a good cloak to smokescreen their own depravity.

Yet, when religion does live up to its standards, it can produce the noblest results.

Take the United States of America: Faith in God inspired the words of the Declaration of Independence, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights ..."

Faith in God dictates the belief that all people are equal. Can atheism or agnosticism offer the same guarantee?

The key is not to throw out the "baby with the bath water" and reject the power of faith in God while rejecting false prophets, zealots and fanatics.

It would be hardly comforting to wake up each morning and feel that our actions make no true difference. It would be hard to live a life without a purpose that has cosmic consequences. It would be hard to live a life without the occasional glimpse of the bigger picture ... without the sensation of being wrapped in the wings of the *Shechinah*, as we may be privileged to do when we sit in the sukkah this week.

11. As We Sit in the Sukkah

As we enter the sukkah, which is in itself an act of faith, and we bask in the "shadow of faith," the sukkah beckons us to revisit our faith and discover how it is one of the most powerful resources in life.

Our challenge is to not just to enter the sukkah and be sheltered by its "shadow of faith," but to *dwell* in the sukkah – to integrate and internalize the faith in our personal lives.

The sukkah is thus not a lifeless hut; it is a living organism which energizes and vitalizes our faith and connection to the eternal.

To do our sukkah justice and help actualize its potential, it would be a good idea to invite to your sukkah your friends and acquaintances – even (or perhaps, especially) those that may be struggling with their faith or may call themselves agnostics or atheists – and have a lively conversation about faith and its meaning in our lives.

Invite your children into the conversation. Challenge them to think about their faith and how to make it a dynamic force instead of a cultural or mechanical one.

Transform the sukkah experience into an adventure – a journey into the recesses of your soul and the things you deeply believe in.

In closing ...

May the “shadow of faith” enrich all of us this Sukkot and bring deeper faith into all our lives. And may it connect us to the only true reality – which is God – in a palpable and lasting way. Happy Sukkot!