

“A Letter to My Children”
Yom Kippur Morning 5785

Dear Roni, Tom, Danielle and Yonatan,

This past year was tough.

Beginning on the horrible morning of October 7th, when I started to understand what is happening, first sick from worry for your physical safety, and then when I knew that you were not at the festival, not at the Zikim beach or not visiting a friend in Be’eri, I knew you were “safe” but then my worries shifted from your physical well-being to the well-being of your souls. As the horrors of the day started unfolding, I started worrying, for the things you were exposed to, to videos and voice recordings and WhatsApp messages, stories that can break even the strongest amongst us.

I worried what might happen to the children of my best friends, Nir, Sigal and Ran - whose children were being called to reserve duty or to what might happen to your friends, and your friends’ families.

And then, on November 2nd, when Itai Sa’adon, the brother of Danielle’s best friend Mika, a 21-year-old tank commander, was killed during a battle in Gaza, my heart shattered for I had few words that could truly comfort you. And I wasn't there to hug you.

It was an extremely hard year.

And in a very different way - it was also an extremely difficult year here as well. Finding ourselves feeling threatened and isolated. It hurt to my core to discover that friends we have built relationships with for years, have abandoned us.

Trying to figure out our role, as American Jews, of how and where we can best support Israel while also protecting ourselves from the rising tides of antisemitism.

An extremely difficult year.

But you know me well - I'm the endless optimist, I'm the one that will always try to find a positive angle. To make lemonade from lemons. To turn a setback into a comeback, to see the glass as half full.

I ask myself - and you – “Could an opportunity come out of the atrocities of October 7th that we can use to grow, to learn, to acquire tools needed to deal with the growing challenges and horrors in our world?”

When I was confronted with the horrific videos, recordings and testimonies, which if I'm being honest, I wish today I would have not seen, and if you haven't, please don't, for the images scar your soul - I found myself grappling with my own theology, and my own understanding of who and where was God on October 7th.

I felt real physical pain as I found myself wondering what's the purpose of believing in God, when such horrors can happen? When there is so much evil and hate in the world around us.

I found myself questioning God.

So, today, I want to talk with you about God. And as I sat to write this letter, it occurred to me that I truly have never had the “God” conversation with you.

Yes, we have amazing conversations about so many things, we share so many experiences, but somehow, even around a rabbi's dinner table, talk about the big “G” isn't so prevalent, and if we don't talk about it, I wonder how many others do?

I'm saddened that we rarely talk about God. It might be one of the most important topics we should talk about for having faith and having a relationship with God, or lack of such, can shape your life.

Our theology can feed our souls or leave us starving, it can fill our tank of resilience and hope or leave us stranded on the side of the road of life, it can quench our thirst for meaning and purpose or it can leave us dehydrated, weak and with parched souls.

And I suddenly tremble.

Are you stuck at the same place many of my congregants are? Are you stuck with what I call “pediatric Judaism”- with the image of God you had when you were 13 years old training for your Bat Mitzvah? I want to believe you don’t see God as an old man with a white beard sitting on a cloud, but what image or understanding of God do you have?

So, let’s not just dwell in the great sadness of October 7th, let’s not just occupy ourselves with arguments about what Israel should be doing or not, in Lebanon, Gaza and with Iran. Let’s not just argue if the U.S. is doing enough to help and why is the world against us? Let’s go beyond contesting how many people really died in Gaza and how many of them were innocent?

Let’s try to remove ourselves from tormenting questions that we do not have answers for – “Will the hostages ever come home?”

Let’s leave all that aside just for a moment, and let’s examine all our experiences this past year and talk about if and how it affected our thoughts about God and God’s role in our lives.

Rabbi Benay Lappe, teaches that every culture, tradition, and religion has a master story that answers life’s fundamental questions.

For Jews, our master story has and will always be the existence of God.

It's not that one has to believe in God to be Jewish. The opposite is true, you are Jewish only because you have been born as such, it has nothing to do with your belief or level of observance. But without a notion of God, there would be no notion of Torah, and without Torah there would be no Jewish ethics, values, tradition and wisdom. Whether you believe in God or not, your essence as a Jew is deeply rooted in this mystery we call God.

And let me just remind you - we are called the children of Israel - Israel meaning the one who wrestles with God. By definition our destiny is to question God, to wrestle with our faith.

So, let's do that today.

Rabbi Lappe also teaches that every master story "ultimately and inevitably" crashes. And our story's answers are, all of a sudden, no longer workable.

I believe that on October 7th, our master stories crashed.

In the closed secure rooms in the Kibbutzim around Gaza people were asking with desperation, "Where is the army? Why are they not saving us?" Their master story that the IDF will always be there - crashed. And we who watched helpless from afar asked – "Where is God?"

Rabbi Lappe teaches that there are three possible responses to a crash.

Option One - deny that a crash occurred and revert to your master story.

Option Two - accept that your master story has crashed, completely reject that master story, and jump off into a completely new story.

Option Three - accept that the story has crashed, but instead of abandoning the story, you stay in it, reinterpreting it through the lens of the crash, and build a new story from the remains of the material that remained after the crash.

I cannot subscribe to option one - sticking to the original story. That is an orthodox understanding of a God that I do not share. That even when I see horrors as I did - I do not change or challenge, not even one iota of my faith system.

Option one people say, "It's God's will."

That's not for me, I don't want to have such a God.

I'll pass.

I also do not subscribe to option two - Almost every week I meet people who blame God for horrible life experiences they had, usually many years ago, or they blame their temple or their rabbi - and they gave it all up, they gave up on temple, and a relationship with a rabbi and they gave up on God.

It has become my life's mission to try and show those people that they don't have to throw out the baby with the water. There is a way to connect to Joyous Judaism, right here at TJ - if they only give it a chance.

Option three -that's me, for it allows me to acknowledge the pain, reinterpret the destruction, and rebuild a future from the shattering of my previous concepts and beliefs - and doing so without losing hope, without losing faith.

As a Jewish people we have suffered more than one epic destruction.

And in each there were those who chose to stick to what they always knew and did, but history teaches us they eventually lose and disappear.

There were those who abandoned it altogether, we see it today in the growing numbers of Israelis leaving Israel and Jews in the U.S. wishing to disconnect from Israel and from Judaism altogether.

And there were the option three people - who by their innovation, courage, ability to build back from the ashes, advanced and moved Judaism forward. After the destruction of the second temple -Rabbinic Judaism arose. After the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisitions - Mysticism and Kabbalah were embraced. And after the Holocaust - two things happened: the State of Israel was established and Jewish thinkers provided us with many

different ways to understand the role of God in such a horror.

So, let's talk about what Jewish thought has to offer us when we ask, "Where was God on October 7th?"

Let's dive into our own understanding of God.

After the Holocaust for many, the easiest and most natural response was-"God is dead." For if there were a God, God would surely have prevented the Holocaust. The conclusion is clear, we are on our own.

Others like Martin Buber, claim there is an "**eclipse of God**" – meaning that there are times when God is inexplicably absent from history. That God, for reasons unknowable to us, is present but refused to reveal itself.

Others, like theologian Arthur Cohen, argue that God is simply so transcendent that God is beyond our reach – too far removed – **a distant God**.

And Rabbi Harold Kushner's in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* presents a theology that is not eclipsed or distant but rather that **God is limited** - a God that is not all powerful - a God that is not omnipotent. It's a God that hears your prayers and his answer is "I can't" - and that's where we step into the picture - in those horrible moments we can be God's partners in filling in the void and being a source of blessing for those suffering.

A limited God was an idea that other theologians, Eliezer Berkovits, among them couldn't accept. He believed that God is in fact all powerful, but that God respects human freedom and thus gave us the power to exercise our own free will even to do horrible things, and that God doesn't intervene with our free will - for if he did, he would break the covenant he has with humanity.

Others suggest we should try to find meaning in these horrific events. That they are part of our story as people, part of God's plan - most well-known was philosopher Emil Fackenheim, for him tragedies are a necessity for Jewish survival. As much as I hate to admit it, he might be right.

Many talk about October 7th as the event that united the torn and broken Israeli society of October 6th and that created the united diaspora of the October 8th Jew.

And I would be remiss if I didn't mention the theologies – that argue that God can be evil or that God is punishing us for sins, or nach Auschwitz a position which forbids us to contemplate the role of God post Holocaust as it is deemed to lessen the suffering and opens a place that could excuse what happened.

Wow - Take a deep breath, you just graduated Jewish Theology 101.

I have been writing to you for the past twelve years – and I have never asked you to respond, but today, I will. I would love you to, and I am asking this also of my congregants, with whom, and with your permission I am sharing this letter - to please share your thoughts about God's role in our life and if your opinion about God changed post - October 7th.

Our theme this year is A Year of Spirituality and Soulfulness - what better time than now to re-examine our own sets of beliefs. In fact, this entire past year I re-examined mine. And as you well know, I am not someone who likes to have limited options. I like asking questions. I love possibilities. And knowing me, it probably doesn't surprise you that I refuse to choose any single theology.

Roni, Tom, Danielle and Yonatan, I think you know it, but let me say it again, for some people find it surprising. I don't believe in God, rather I prefer saying "I have a relationship with God."

There are really hard days in which I feel God is just absent and I try to get strength from memories of all the other times in my life, like the days you were born, that I felt God's presence. I am a follower of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel who believed that faith is an active, dynamic relationship with the divine, rather than mere belief in doctrines. He emphasized the importance of awe, wonder, and the experience of the sacred in everyday life. I go back and back to his teaching that, "Faith is not the

certainty that everything will be alright; faith is the courage to face the uncertainty."

And then there are days like October 7th where God is just dead for me. When I feel abandoned, on those days it's Rabbi Kushner who reminds me to turn to my Jewish community for support and to Jewish wisdom, like our mourning rituals, which provide tools for me to process and cope with any challenge I face.

Other times I let myself imagine that God is just too far away or too limited, and that just like any other parent who desperately wants to help his child avoid pain and suffering but simply can't. I try to imagine this God looking over us like I looked over you, many times when you were sick or heart broken, deeply sad or in pain and I couldn't help, or this past year when many times I was just too far to help.

And most of the time, I chose to believe that God granted us free will. I understand that some people will choose to do evil and harm, but I can choose to give meaning to my life by dedicating it to helping people choose goodness and love.

Today we sing Avinu Malkeinu- a haunting melody that reinforces the power of the relationship between a parent and a child. In our case, I am your father, I am no king, and I'm definitely not God.

I'm not the father from the story about the daughter who brought a no good fiance to meet her parents, the guy has no job, no savings, no ambition. And when the father asks him what he will do when his daughter wants a home – he answers “B'ezrat ha'shem” – God will provide. When asked about a nice car, vacations, jewelry again the guy answers – “B'ezrat ha'shem” – God will provide.

So, the father turns to the mother and says, “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that he loves our daughter, and she is truly happy, the bad news is that he thinks I'm God.”

I'm no God but I'm sure there are times you feel I am absent, times you feel I'm too far, times you feel I'm limited in my ability to offer comfort or support, or even to control things. I'm sure you noticed there are times when I hold myself back allowing you make your own choices even though I have plenty to say or times you might have felt my actions were meant to punish you or have you learn a lesson from your challenges.

What I'm trying to say is that just as we see our parents in different ways at different times - why should we expect anything different from Avinu Malkeinu - from God.

This Yom Kippur, let us take the time to re-examine one of the most important yet less discussed concepts in our life - God.

As I said, I'd love to hear your thoughts.

May your relationship with God, just like the one with your parents and one day God willing with your own children, continue to constantly evolve, change and strengthen, may you find it to be a source of comfort, strength and wisdom, even when at times all it will be is annoying and demanding. May you never take it for granted but also never forget that our creator, and that your creator, loves you unconditionally.

G'mar Chatima Tova

Aba