

**“This I Believe”
Rosh Hashanah 2007
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I have a confession to make.
I love... the radio.

I know, I know being Rosh HaShanah and all, it's probably not the confession you were expecting (or maybe hoping) to hear, but I must admit it, I do, I love the radio. And while I will agree with you that television and movies, DVD's and Tivo, Netflix and YouTube, they all have their charms, but in my mind, there is nothing quite like the radio.

You see, for me, the radio is linked to some of my earliest and my best loved childhood memories. I remember waking up every morning to the sound of my father getting ready for his workday, always listening to the CBC, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. The voices of the newscasters were as familiar to me as the voices of my best friends, and I would lie in bed listening to events that had transpired on the other side of the world while we had slept safely in our beds that night.

Later in the day, my family and I would listen to the radio together, while preparing or eating dinner, and we would talk about the different stories or insights that we'd heard as each one was reported. The radio announcers would use their creative abilities to make puns that would make us groan, and our imaginations couldn't help but stretch as we saw in our minds images of people living, working, and dreaming all around our city, the country and the world.

There was even a comedy program we listened to on Sunday mornings. Now, comedy can be very funny if you can see it – but as those of you who have lived without televisions or those of you who love the radio like me, know – comedy, tragedy, romance, baseball! and storytelling - they all come alive differently when you listen to them on the radio. The sigh of the broken hearted lovers, the laugh of the triumphant heroes, even the crack of the bat as the ball goes sailing out of the park, they all sound different when we hear them, rather than see them. And hearing them, we are challenged to use our imaginations in ways we often don't when sitting in front of the TV.

But, more than the newscasts that come to us on the hour reporting events from around the world and even more than the stories that are painted in words by talented radio announcers, what I love the most about the radio are the ideas that people share. Ideas about who they are, the values they hold most important, and especially, the ideas they share about what they believe. And no day is more appropriate than today, Rosh Ha Shanah, the first days of the new year, to begin to talk about these things seriously– who we are, what is important to us, and indeed, what each of us believes.

In the 1950's, acclaimed journalist Edward R. Murrow created a very unique and special radio program called “This I Believe.” Each day, millions of Americans gathered by their radios to hear compelling essays from leading personalities of the time – Eleanor Roosevelt, Jackie Robinson, Helen Keller, as well as corporate leaders, cab drivers, scientists, and secretaries – anyone able to distill into a few minutes the guiding principles by which they lived. Their words brought comfort and inspiration to a country worried about the Cold War, McCarthyism, and racial division. (thisibelieve.org)

In his introduction to the original Radio Series, Murrow said: *This I Believe*. *By that name, we bring you a new series of radio broadcasts presenting the personal philosophies of men and women in all walks of life. In this brief time each night, people of all kinds who need have nothing more in common than integrity – a real honesty – will talk out loud about the rules they live by, the things they have found to be the basic values of their lives. We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion. A lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism, or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap in the marketplace. While such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply.*

Sadly, it seems that in spite of the amount of progress we have achieved in the last fifty years, unfortunately, not that much has changed. We are still plagued by war and the on-going threat of global terrorism. We live with concerns about the environment and the state of the planet we are leaving the next generation. Racism, neo-Nazism, and Religious Fundamentalism are taking their toll on the human spirit and psyche. Perhaps this is why recently, a new generation of This I Believe has been created.

In 2005, journalist Jay Allison and Dan Gediman revived Murrow's program with the belief that by sharing the truths each one of us holds we can find comfort in this world. This I Believe has been recreated as a national media project engaging people in writing, sharing, and discussing the core values and beliefs that guide their daily lives. Every Monday morning on your local National Public Radio station, in between the news reports and the famous guest personalities– there is a pause for about three to five minutes – and in those few minutes a new generation has begun to share their versions of “This I Believe.”

Now I have to be honest that as Jews, I understand that it may seem complicated sometimes to determine exactly what it is that we believe. My colleague and teacher Rabbi David Wolpe taught, and I know some of you have heard me say this before, that in Jewish History, as in most histories of any ancient and complex tradition, for every example of something that *is*, you can always find a counter example of when it *is not*. This makes it very hard to say that Judaism teaches *something*, because inevitably, somebody who either has sufficient knowledge of Judaism, or access to an Internet search engine, will find an example of the *reverse* of that which Judaism teaches. Judaism is thought to be a tradition of law, but, as Rabbi Wolpe tells us, the movement of Hasidism was in fact, in its origin, a rebellion against some of the legalism of Judaism.

But today I don't want you to be worried about whether or not your beliefs agree or disagree with those of the person sitting next to you. Even the creators of the new project *This I Believe* say their goal is not to persuade Americans to agree on the same beliefs. Rather they hope to encourage people to begin the much more difficult tasks of articulating what they do believe and developing respect for beliefs different from their own.

And usually we don't spend too much time thinking about what we do believe, usually we spend our time defining ourselves by what we don't believe. I am a Democrat we say, because I don't believe in the values of the Republican party. I am a Jew, we say, because I don't believe that Jesus was the Messiah. I am a Conservative

Jew, we say, because I don't believe in Orthodoxy or Reform Judaism. Today I don't want you to tell me who you are because of what you don't believe, I don't want you to tell me who you are because of who you are not. Today, on this Rosh Ha Shanah I want to challenge you to begin thinking about who you are because of what you **do** believe. Because you have spent the time thinking about the values that are most important to you, and because you can articulate them in a positive way.

Messages of belief need not be complicated. In fact, in the texts of our tradition, some of the most compelling statements of belief are articulated most clearly in silence. Within the first few chapters of the book of Genesis, Cain kills his brother Abel beginning a long history of sibling rivalry in the stories of our first families. And God comes to Cain and asks him "Where is your brother Abel?" And the text of the Torah tells us Cain replies to God incredulously saying "Ha Shomer Achi Anokhi?" "Do you honestly believe that I am my brother's keeper? And God's silence is overwhelming. It is a statement of belief - that yes you are your brother's keeper - This I Believe, that each person, each one of us is responsible for the health and well being of the members of our family to the best of our abilities - This I Believe - what do you Believe?

Just a few chapters later in Genesis we read of God's plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. When God reveals this plan to Abraham, a famous debate takes place with Abraham arguing for the sake of the righteous few who may live there. What of the fifty he asks, what of the forty five, what of the forty, the thirty, the twenty, the ten? And although we know from the text of the Torah that the cities are ultimately destroyed, Avraham's key statement of belief rings true in our ears each year we read it and repeat it. When he challenges God by saying "Ha shofet et kol ha'aretz lo ya'se mishpat?" Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" Abraham says to us - I believe that every individual counts. That each one of us can make a difference by making a commitment to helping others through acts of social action and justice. This I Believe - What do you Believe?

When the Israelites were freed from Egyptian bondage and they stood wearied, exhausted and afraid after witnessing the ten plagues, and the parting of the sea and the drowning of their oppressors, Miriam took the timbrel in her hand and led the women down to the sea where they danced and sang "Shiru L'Adonai - a Song of Thanks and Rejoicing. In this action Miriam says so clearly to us - This I Believe - that there are times in our lives that call for great joy and celebration, times for dancing and singing - This I Believe - What do You Believe?

David and Jonathan believed in the value of true friendship and loyalty. Hannah believed in the power of prayer. Jephthah's daughter believed in the dignity of the human spirit to rise above the most terrible and cruelest of fates. Sarah believed that it is possible to find laughter in any situation. Joshua believed in strength and in courage. What do You Believe?

The new generation of This I Believe writers exemplify the challenges that face us and counter those challenges with unique expressions of faith. *Sarah Adams, an English Professor at Olympic College in Washington writes.*

If I have one operating philosophy about life, it is this: "Be Cool to the Pizza Delivery Dude; it's good luck," Four principles guide the pizza dude philosophy. Principle 1: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness.

I let him cut me off in traffic, let him safely hit the exit ramp from the left lane, let him forget to use his blinker without extending any of my digits out the window or toward my horn because there should be one moment in my harried life when a car may encroach or cut off or pass and I let it go. Sometimes when I have become so certain of my ownership of my lane, daring anyone to challenge me, the pizza dude speeds by in his rusted Chevette. His pizza light atop his car glowing like a beacon reminds me to check myself as I flow through the world. After all, the dude is delivering pizza to young and old, families and singletons, gays and straights, blacks, whites, and browns, rich and poor, and vegetarians and meat eaters alike. As he journeys, I give safe passage, practice restraint, show courtesy, and contain my anger.

Principle 2: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in empathy. Let's face it: We've all taken jobs just to have a job because some money is better than none. I've held an assortment of these jobs and was grateful for the paycheck that meant I didn't have to share my Cheerios with my cats. In the big pizza wheel of life, sometimes you're the hot bubbly cheese and sometimes you're the burnt crust. It's good to remember the fickle spinning of that wheel.

Principle 3: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in honor, and it reminds me to honor honest work. Let me tell you something about these dudes; They never took over a company, and as CEO, artificially inflated the value of the stock and cashed out their own shares, bringing the company to the brink of bankruptcy, resulting in twenty thousand people losing their jobs while the CEO builds a home the size of a luxury hotel. Rather the dudes sleep the sleep of the just.

Principle 4: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in equality. My measurement as a human being, my worth, is the pride I take in performing my job – any job – and the respect with which I treat others. I am the equal of the world not because of the car I drive, the size of the TV I own, the weight I can bench-press, or the calculus equations I can solve. I am the equal to all I meet because of the kindness in my heart. And it all starts here – with the pizza delivery dude. Tip him well, friends and brethren, for that which you bestow freely and willingly will bring you all the happy luck that a grateful universe knows how to return. This I Believe.

What is most remarkable and compelling to me about the This I Believe essays is that in their simplicity they convey universal messages. In 350 to 500 words the authors, who are ordinary people like you and I, ensure us that we are not alone. That others around us share the same sense of fear, of hope, of purpose, of doubt, and of the belief that each of us as human beings can grow and change and make an impact on the lives of others.

This year, this Rosh HaShanah, I would like to challenge each and every one of you to write your own This I Believe essay in an effort for the community of Temple Beth Sholom to begin an on-going, respectful conversation about our personal beliefs. The guidelines are simple. Name Your Belief: If you can't name it in a sentence of two, your essay might not be about belief. Rather than writing a list, consider focusing on one core belief. Be Brief. Be Positive – Say what you do believe not what you don't believe. Be Personal, make your essay about you, about your story. Try to speak in the first person. Try reading your essay aloud to yourself several times, and each time edit it and simplify it until you find the words, tone, and message that truly echo your belief and the way you speak. (thisibelieve.org) And when you're finished, send it to me, here

at Beth Sholom, and we will begin the important journey that the New Year encourages all of us to take; determining who we are, what is important to us and what we believe.

My favourite This I Believe essay was written by Joshua Rittenberg and encapsulates what I believe is the spirit of optimism and energy that will carry the next generation forward able to face whatever challenges lie ahead.

Josh writes; *I'm sixteen. The other night, while I was busy thinking about important social issues, like what to do over the weekend and who to do it with, I overheard my parents talking about my future. My dad was upset – not the usual stuff that he and Mom and, I guess, a lot of parents worry about, like which college I'm going to, how far away it is from home, and how much it's going to cost. Instead, he was upset about the world his generation is turning over to mine, a world he fears has a dark and a difficult future – if it has a future at all. He sounded like this: "There will be a pandemic that kills millions, a devastating energy crisis, a horrible world wide depression, and a nuclear explosion set off in anger."*

As I lay on the living room couch, eavesdropping on their conversation, starting to worry about the future my father was describing, I found myself looking at some old family photos. There was a picture of my grandfather in his Citadel uniform. He was a member of the class of 1942 – the war class. Next to his picture were photos of my great grandparents, Ellis Island immigrants. Seeing those pictures made me feel a lot better. I believe tomorrow will be better than today – that the world my generation grows into is going to get better, not worse. Those pictures helped me understand why.

I considered some of the awful things my grandparents and great grandparents had seen in their lifetimes: two world wars, killer flu, segregation, a nuclear bomb. But they saw other things, too, better things: the end of two world wars, the polio vaccine, passage of the civil rights laws. They even saw the Red Sox win the world series – twice.

I believe that my generation will see better things, too – that we will witness the time when AIDS is cured and cancer is defeated; when the Middle East will find peace and Africa grain, and the Cubs win the World Series – probably, only once. I will see things as inconceivable to me today as a moon shot was to my grandfather when he was sixteen, or the Internet to my father when he was sixteen.

Ever since I was a little kid, whenever I've had a lousy day, my dad would put his arm around me and promise me that "tomorrow will be a better day." I challenged my father once: "How do you know that?" He said, "I just do." I believed him. My great-grandparents believed that, and my grandparents, and so do I.

As I listened to my dad talking that night, so worried about what the future holds for me and my generation, I wanted to put my arm around him and tell him what he always told me, "Don't worry, Dad. Tomorrow will be a better day. This, I believe.

Today is Rosh Hashanah. It is the beginning of a New Year. I believe that being surrounded by family, friends and community is the foundation of our lives. I believe that change is possible and the process of teshuvah is worthwhile. I believe that self-examination and the sharing of our thoughts and ideas, even when we disagree with one another, can only lead to further understanding and connection. This I Believe. What do you Believe?