

**Magical Thinking – A Guide for the Perplexed**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5769 – September 30, 2008**  
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In the spirit of this season, I have a confession to make. On July 19, it was my fault that the NY Mets ended their 10 game winning-streak. It was my fault they lost to the Cincinnati Red's 5-2, I am sorry and I seek your understanding and forgiveness. The newspapers that morning focused on their poor pitching and lack of clutch hitting – but the truth is, it was my fault that they began the downward spiral that ultimately led to yet another disappointing season– of this I have no doubt. And should you wonder how it was possible for a modest rabbi who happened to be sitting in an apartment in Jerusalem 6000 miles from the game, how could I possibly influence such an outcome – it really is quite simple. Because of the 7 hour time difference, I was usually sound asleep when the games were over here in New York. So each morning when I awoke in Jerusalem, I had a routine. I would wash, dress, put on my *tefillen* and *daven*, make coffee I would take my cup of coffee and only then would I sit down at the computer and get the scores from the previous night's baseball games. I followed this routine religiously throughout their entire winning streak. But that morning I was excited to see the results –they had won 10 games- in a row! This was clearly a turning point in their season – so that morning, I confess, I altered my routine – instead of putting on my *tefillen* and *davening before* I checked the score – I checked my computer first, before I *davened* – and of course because I changed my routine, the Mets lost – it was all my fault, and I apologize and seek your forgiveness today.

Now I suspect there are some cynics here this morning who will protest that my altered *davening* routine had absolutely nothing to do with the end of the Mets winning streak – but some of you understand me – you know what I am saying, you have had similar feelings that your actions at critical moments were influencing the fate of the world. It is called magical thinking – all children do it – and while the cynics insist that it is something we need to outgrow as we mature that we need to come to understand that the world is a more complicated place and it does not revolve around you, around your thoughts and feelings –some of us know better.

“Step on a crack – break your mother's back” – was a silly little ditty we sang as kids. Of course we knew better, but few of us were willing to tempt fate so we spent most of our childhoods judiciously avoiding sidewalk cracks – we just loved our mothers too much to take such a risk.

But as we became adults that cynical voice in our heads was insistent that there was absolutely, positively no correlation between the health of our mother's backs and the number of sidewalk cracks we stepped on. So, we left all that silly thinking behind – sort of. Fast forward to young Rabbi Alan, no longer a kid skipping over sidewalk cracks – I had graduated college, Phi Beta Kappa, I had been earned my Masters degree in Rabbinics and had been ordained a rabbi by the Jewish Theological Seminary of America – quite the thoughtful person was I – I had been fortunate enough to find the love of my life, marry, I had been welcomed as a rabbi in significant congregation in Southfield Michigan, and we were expecting our first child. As I entered the newly painted and wallpapered nursery, all set to welcome our newborn daughter Dina, I noticed a red string had been tied around her crib. It was placed there by my mother-in-law who informed me that it was there to ward off the *eyin hara* – the evil eye. You see people can be petty and jealous and when good things happen to you – rather than rejoice in your good fortune they frequently harbor thoughts of resentment and ill will. Those thoughts

have power and to protect my innocent daughter from such evil an antidote was needed – the red *bintele* – the red string tied around her crib. Ridiculous I thought. Silly, ridiculous folk superstition.

So, did I remove the string or not? Show of hands: How many of you, had you been in my position would have removed the string? How many of you would have left it? That's ok – I left it as well. And the rest of you would I suppose just have stood there in emotional turmoil, not sure what to do? OK – so those of you who would have removed it – you are our resident cynics. And those who would have left it – you are our resident faithful – and the rest – well you are our religiously confused. But that's ok. Here is my mission this morning – in the next few minutes it is my hope to convince our cynics into becoming more faithful, our faithful into becoming more cynical and to clarify all of this for you who are confused.

If you are a cynic, your position has been bolstered by a slew of books this year, like Christopher Hitchens's "God is not Great, How religion poisons everything," and Richard Dawkins, "The God Delusion". The underlying premise of these books is that you are either intellectually sophisticated– or you are religious –either you are morally sensitive, or you are religious but Hitchens and Dawkins insist that you cannot be religious *and* intellectually sophisticated, you cannot be religious *and* morally sensitive.

These authors challenge us by saying: there is belief and reality, religion and science, fanaticism and cynicism and you have to choose one or the other. Either you dismiss God as a delusion or wrap your wrists with red strings to protect yourself from the evil eye. These are, they insist, our only choices. And this leaves most of us confused.

There is a prayer that we recite on each of these High Holy Days called *U'netaneh Tokek* –it is probably the best known of the High Holy Day prayers. It pictures God as sitting in Judgment over all mankind as we pass one by one before His throne, as a shepherd counts his sheep so does God review our deeds and determine our destiny for the coming year – who shall live and who shall die, who shall prosper and who shall go wanting, who shall be bowed down and who shall be raised up.

How do you read that prayer? What does it mean to you? What are you thinking when the Cantor and choir leads us in their magnificent rendition of these ancient words?

There are Jews who will *daven* these words today and have no doubt that they are true – absolutely, completely, literally true – there is a God, He is sitting in judgment over us and our fate is literally in the balance – of this they have no doubt. But there are probably very few of these "no doubt" Jews here today? We, Conservative Jews do not tend to be no doubt Jews.

There are Jews who will refuse to *daven* these words today – they will dismiss them, much as they would ridicule the red *bintele* as religious superstition – there is no one sitting in Judgment – no kindly long bearded father sitting up in heaven ready to make things right–there is no God – say these Jews - only a harsh cruel world of randomness and chance and the sooner we confront this truth the better off we will be. "Who shall live and who shall die" – nonsense.

But there are probably few here today who are ready to dismiss this prayer as "nonsense" – we Conservative Jews may have a touch of cynicism but we do not tend to be that cynical.

*U'netaneh Tokef* can, I believe, be a Rorschach test for the kind of Jew you are. And if you are here today, I suspect, it is a prayer that confuses you and troubles you. There is part of you that wants to believe it, and part of you that can't. Part of you that loves it and part of you that is troubled by it – and most of you just do not know what to make of it.

There are rabbis today who are speaking to Jews who have no doubt – but that is certainly not me. I am a rabbi to the confused. I am speaking to people who have their doubts – they are neither certain that there is a God nor that there isn't one, not sure if their fate is sealed or random, Jews who would not think of being anywhere but in shul on Rosh Hashanah and then once they are here wonder what the heck they are doing here. Jews who feel both silly and at home in this place. You are my Jews, and I love you for being exactly who you are.

You *daven* these prayers and you want to believe in such a God, but then you look at the world and you wonder if such a belief is possible. You want an explanation for the unfairness in the world. Here is the kind of thing I hear every day: "Rabbi, how can there be a God if this is happening to me?" "I'm a decent person – I haven't killed anyone, hurt anyone, I give *tzedakah* and try and lead an honest life –so why did I get cancer? Or, why did my husband die? Or, I come to *shul* regularly, why did I lose my job? Or the countless other cries of pain and outrage that rise up in a world that so often seems to run counter to any semblance of justice or fairness.

Those of complete faith and those of no faith have clear and unambiguous answers of this they have no doubt. The religious no-doubters say: "Check your *mezuzah!*" The cynical no-doubters say: "of course the world makes no sense because there is no God." Yes, in 2008, we hear most loudly the voices of the no doubters, the opinions of those who have a fanatical faith or no faith.

Rabbi Shraga Simmons writes on the *Eish Hatorah* Web site: My wife's grandmother had developed a numbness in her hand. She visited a variety of doctors and specialists, but no one could help her. The numbness persisted for months, and was getting progressively worse. Finally, my wife's grandmother asked her rabbi for advice. "Check your mezuzah," he said. Left with no other "more practical" option, she took down the mezuzah and looked inside. The meticulously written scroll was perfect -- except for one letter missing: a *yud*. *Yud* is related to the Hebrew word for hand, *yad*. My wife's grandmother had the mezuzah replaced, and within days her hand returned to normal. True story - concludes Rabbi Simmons, of this he had no doubt.

So what are we to make of this story? The no doubters have, well, no doubt. Those of fanatical faith would embrace it and say amen – those whose cynicism is complete would reject it as being silly and say – there is no God that operates in such a silly petty way as to pick on a little old grandmother and strike her hand with numbness because her mezuzah was missing a letter? If there was a God, doesn't God have anything better to do than pick on a grandmother? Ahmedinejad flourishes, Osamah bin Laden is safe and sound – but this guy's grandmother is deserving of God's wrath because of a faulty *yud*?

And we who sit here today, we are confused. We know where these feelings come from. They come from the same place that made me feel I caused the Mets to lose. They come from the same place that prevented me from taking the red ribbon off my daughter's crib. We, you and I have a problem – we are neither cynics nor fanatics and in a world of no doubters, we are not

sure where we fit in. We envy their certainty and clarity; we know that it would relieve our stress and anxiety over the complexities and unpredictability of life. We long for a connection to our religious tradition that reminds us of the simple faith we had as children. Confronted with these no doubters, something has to give and in our nostalgia, and in our ambivalence, and in our guilt, we end up either being drawn to causes which are completely antithetical to the values and the freedoms we hold most dear, or abandoning the faith of our ancestors – we end up as fanatics or cynics. And we don't want to be fanatics and we don't want to be cynics – but being confused is not exactly the ground upon which one builds a great religious life either. Is it any wonder that our kind of religion, Conservative Judaism is on the defensive? In a world of no doubters – we seem so, wishy-washy, so indecisive. Our faithful skepticism used to be where the majority resides. We were the ballast that kept the ship from lurching too far to the left or the right – but when the middle disappears – the ship loses control and the ride becomes as violent and unsettled as the one we are now on. We live in a world ruled by those who have no doubt – and the world is not a better place because of it.

Did I just say that being confused is not exactly the ground upon which once builds a great religious life? Maybe it is. Maybe it should be. When the greatest Jewish thinker in history, the Rambam, when Moses Maimonides who lived in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when he chose a title for the most monumental undertaking in Jewish religious thinking in the last several thousand years – do you know what he called it? *Moreh Nevuchim* -- A Guide for the Perplexed. Not a Guide for the Faithful. Not a Guide for the Cynical. A Guide for the Perplexed. My friends, it is my contention today that the future of Judaism and civilization lies with you – not with the no doubters. That being confused is not only a possible ground upon which a great religious life can be built – it is the only ground upon which a great religious and civil life should be built. My friends – your ambivalence is not what is wrong with you – it is precisely what is right with you. It is the absence of ambivalence that is what is wrong with them.

So in my last few minutes this morning, permit me, if I might be so bold – to give you my Guide for the Perplexed. A path that rejects both fanatical faith and total cynicism – a third way, the Path of the Perplexed, if you will – that I would humbly suggest is our way, and has been our way for thousands of years and might just be the antidote for much of what ails our contemporary world. (Aren't you glad you came here today?)

Open your *Mahzorim*, your prayer books to page 70 if you will. This is the *Shma* – if there is a prayer that is even more familiar than *U'netaneh Tokef* – it is this one – sometimes called the watchwords of our faith because of its opening line: *Shma Yisrael* – it is in this one sentence that we affirm our belief in God. For thousands of years these words have been on our lips – when Jews marched to their deaths in the gas chambers of Auschwitz – these words were on their lips. There is no prayer that is as ancient, as significant, as meaningful – uh and as problematic as this one. There are three paragraphs to this prayer – which actually is not a prayer at all - -but excerpts from the bible that have been reprinted as a prayer in our prayer books. The first is from Deut chapter 6, the second is from Deut 11 and the third is from Numbers 15. And it is the second paragraph to which I direct your attention now:

*"V'haya im shmoa...* And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, that I will give the rain of your land in its season...and I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle and thou shalt eat and be satisfied. Take heed to yourselves lest your heart be deceived and ye turn aside and serve other gods and worship

them; and the displeasure of the Lord will be aroused against you, and He shut up the heaven so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield up her fruit; and ye perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord giveth you."

Is this true? This prayer, this bible portion insists that if we behave appropriately God will take care of us. And my question is a very simple one – is that true?

Is this not the epitome of magical thinking? That what I do influences the world? Our religious fanatics would say – look, if it is in the Bible it must be true – no doubt about that -- and our cynics are equally sure – they would say just open your eyes and look at the world around you to see how silly such a belief is – no doubt about it. And we, well of course we are perplexed.

*V'haya Im Shamo*a - it doesn't seem to be true. It does not present a picture of the world we live in. We live in a world where very bad things happen to very good people, people who seem to be doing precisely what God wants them to do. We look at our prayer book and we look at our world and we are perplexed.

But, we are not the first to be so confused. The Bible itself included an entire book – The Book of Job to address it. The Book of Job is one loud protest against religious fanaticism. Job is a righteous man—and when all these bad things are allowed to happen to him, to test his faith – his friends come to him and say much the same as our rabbi from *Aish Hatorah* – check your mezuzah. “Job, if all these bad things are happening to you – you must have done something to deserve it, God does not allow bad things to happen to good people – so check your ways, repent, and seek forgiveness from a just God.”

But Job was the father of the Perplexed, the father of our kind of Jews (even though he wasn't even Jewish) -- Job pauses for a moment and then he responds. And Job's response forever changes the trajectory of Jewish belief – he says, “Look, I don't know much, but I know this – I do not deserve what is happening to me – I reject your fanatical theology that claims to know the will of God. And from that day forward a new approach to God is born, a new kind of thinking is born; the kind of thinking that has been our salvation for thousands of years until it was once again hijacked by the extremists, by the no doubters.

The rabbis of the Talmud were also perplexed. Many of them were also our kind of Jews. They too were wrestling with the dilemma of the no doubters of their day. They too were seeking a path between fanaticism and cynicism. There is a Talmudic text in *Avoda Zarah* 54b, it is a discussion that begins with some Roman philosophers challenging the rabbis: “If Judaism is true and your God is the one God, why is idolatry still around – why hasn't your one, all powerful God put an end to the worship of other gods? In other words, the world seems to represent a reality different from the one you Jews profess – how do we explain that. And the rabbis come up with some fascinating responses, they say –look – there is God and there is the world and what happens in the world is not always a reflection of God's will. Siding with the theology of Job over Job's friends and ignoring the explicit implications of Deut – these rabbis introduce the following concept: *olom k'minhago noheyg* – the world pursues its natural course.

“Suppose a man stole a measure of wheat and went and planted it in his own field; *din hu shelo tizmach* – the rabbis argue that by right, it should not grow, in a just world it should not take root, but *olom k'minhago noheyg* – the world pursues its natural course. And then they

give another example: Suppose a man has intercourse with his neighbor's wife, by right, they insist, she should not conceive. In a world that operates by God's law such behavior should not give birth to new life, it should not be rewarded, but *olom k'minhago noheyg* – the world pursues its natural course.” Do you realize what a remarkable passage this is? Two thousand years ago, our rabbis are already arguing that in a moral and just world good things should not happen to bad people. In a just world – stolen wheat should not grow – it is not right that the thief should prosper from his sin, adultery should not create life, wrong should not triumph – but it does – it is a reality say the rabbis we see in our world day in and day out - but what can we do: *Olom k'minhago noheyg* – the world pursues its natural course.

Two thousand years ago our rabbis gave us a guide for the Perplexed - they railed against the fanatics and the cynics. To the cynics they insisted, there is a God who created the universe but God, for God's own good reasons has seen fit to allow His world to function according to the laws of nature – *olom k'minhago noheyg*. And to the fanatics who insist that every act is in fact the will of God, *olom k'minhago noheyg* is a rabbinic rebuke – “No, they cry out, “things happen, sometimes very bad things happen, very unfair things – and this is not necessarily the will of God! *olom k'minhago noheyg* God cries with us over the unfairness of the world.

When the rabbis taught us *Olom k'minhago noheyg* ... they were presenting us with a brilliant alternative. They refused to be limited to the choices of fanatical faith or cynicism – they said, “we know the world is a confusing place and it is ok to be perplexed but if you are going to build a religious faith build it on a foundation of faith *and* freedom – faith *and* sophistication – confronted with the choice of a world devoid of God, or a world inhabited by a vengeful God who brings cancers, and holocausts - -they believed in and prayed to a very different God – one who is not the source of our pain and the author of our suffering but the source of our strength and the author of our salvation.

So this then is my humble Guide for the Perplexed. And now you understand my God of the Perplexed. Now you understand why I sit by your bedside and when you ask me how God could do this to you. How could He send you this cancer, how could He take your wife, how could He punish your child – now you understand why I respond the way I do and say – “I do not believe that your cancer, your loss, your pain and your suffering are from God –my God, who I want to be your God – my God is the one who cries with us over the unfairness of the world – *Olom k'minhago noheyg*

So what are the implications of this for us sitting here today? What are the implications of these beliefs for the New Year that is dawning on this Rosh Hashanah day?

Should we pray here today for a year of success and health, or would our time be better spent working hard and making doctor's appointments? Was the Met's loss really my fault? Did my friend get cancer because she was being punished for her sins?

The fanatic would tell you that the future is in God's hand, therefore the best you can do is be right with God and pray for God's compassion. The cynic will tell you there is no God; the future is in your hands and your hands alone. The fanatic sees only God. The cynic sees only man. I want you to see both – man and God, the hand of God and the absence of God, the possibilities of man and his limitations as well.

As Conservative Jews who embrace the fullness of our tradition, when someone is ill – we

recite a *mi sheberach* – a prayer for a speedy and complete recovery – in addition to seeking the best that modern medicine can provide. For us it is not either or – it is both. And if you find that confusing – that's ok. It is ok to be perplexed. Great things in life are not achieved with ease and not all pain is punishment.

So if doing a mitzvah is no guarantee to success and prayer will not necessarily bring us the things we pray for – why should we do *mitzvot* and why should we pray?

The rabbis in *Pirke Avot* said it as clearly as they could: *s'char mitzvah* – *mitzvah* – the reward for doing a mitzvah – is the mitzvah you do. The reward is not long life, not a life free from pain or illness, suffering or loss – the reward is the deed you do and the world it helps to create.

*Olom K'minhago noheyg* – 2000 years ago our rabbis taught us that we exist in nature – not above it or beyond it – the world that God created operates by laws that are amoral and bad things do happen to good people. Our job as Jews is to harness nature and bring God into a world that desperately needs Him.

Every time I say a *bracha* – I bring God into the world. In a hospital room when I take your hand and say a *bracha* – the world is no longer devoid of God. God is now in that room – not as a magician to magically make the cancer go away – but as a source of strength to enable us to deal with whatever may come our way.

Every time someone steps on this bema and gives me the name of a loved one or friend who is ill and we recite a *mi sheberach* together – the world is no longer devoid of God – we have embraced God as a source of our healing and our hope

Every time a young boy or girl celebrates their Bar/Bat Mitzvah on this bema and recites the holy words of our ancient faith – the world is no longer devoid of God and a new soul rejects the atheism of the cynic and the absurdity of the fanatic and embraces intellectual sophistication and moral sensitivity.

Every time a young couple stands under a *hupah* on this bema and we invoke the *brachot* of *kidushin* – the world is no longer devoid of God and they embark on their journey armed with faith in God and each other and stronger because of the sophistication of their faith.

Yes, we are Conservative Jews, and being perplexed is the nature of our belief, it is the foundation upon which our faith is built. God's torah, say the rabbis, is like two paths: One of fire and one of ice. Take the one and you will die of the heat, take the other and you will die of the cold. What should one do? Walk between them. We are confronted today with two paths – wherever we turn, in politics, in religion – wherever we look we see fire and ice. Walk between them. I am so glad you are here. I am so proud to be your rabbi – I want to be a guide for the perplexed – come let us join hands and walk that path together.