



Temple Beth Sholom

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April Akiva, MAJE Sermon Archive

Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5771
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From Beresheit to Today: What Gives you Faith?

Lorenzo Odone was a seemingly healthy six year old boy who enjoyed school, played sports, and loved the every-day adventures of being a young child. Soon after his sixth birthday Lorenzo's parents began to notice changes in his behavior and overall health. He began to have trouble hearing and had to blast music at sonic levels. Then his vision became impaired. Soon after he could barely walk or even talk. With Lorenzo's nervous system deteriorating at an alarming rate his parents helplessly watched as they began to lose the vibrant son they once had. After visiting a slew of doctors and specialists the Odone family received a death sentence for their child; Lorenzo had a rare genetic disorder called adrenaleukodystrophy and there was no known treatment. Among the thousands of genes in Lorenzo's body, one gene on his X chromosome had mutated and the functioning of this gene meant the difference between life and death. Unwilling to passively watch their son die, Lorenzo's parents set out on a tireless study of human genetics and medicine. Though they did not discover the "cure" or were they able to reverse the damage already inflicted on their son's body, they did discover a special type of oil that slows the deterioration process of the disease. With his parents help, Lorenzo ultimately lived 20 years longer than his original prognosis.

Each human cell is comprised of billions of neurons, millions of proteins, and thousands of genes, all perpetually working to keep our bodies functioning and alive. Over billions of years of trial and error humans have evolved into the complex, unique species that we are today. Our genetic makeup incorporates between 60,000 and 160,000 genes. The sea of letters coded by our genes would author a billion-word book, spanning more than 800 times the length of the Torah from which we just read (Genome). The human genome is so convoluted that a single hiccup in a gene, as in Lorenzo's case, can code for utter catastrophe.

When did this complex recipe for the human race emerge? In the beginning, of course.

Beresheit barah Elohim et hashamayim v'et haaretzIn the Beginning God created the heaven and the earth—Vayivrah Elohim et ha adam b'talmo b'tzelem Eohim, bara Oto zacher u'n'keva bara oto. And God created man in His image, in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them (Gen. 1:1-6).

These words have been magnified, contemplated, and argued for several thousands of years. In light of scientific advancements, more recently evolutionary theory, the first verses of Torah have transformed into one of the most controversial, political debates of the last century: the debate between God/faith and science.

Dozens of Supreme Court cases from as far back as the 1920's stemmed from this argument. Most of the cases, including one as recent as 2005, questioned the role of biblical creationism in public school curriculum, challenging the constitutional separation of church and state. Reputable scientists have brought the question of science and God into the public spectrum through interviews, articles, and by writing numerous books on the topic. In a 2005 Time Magazine article evolutionary biologist and head-strong atheist, Richard Dawkins was brought into a conversation with Evangelical Christian geneticist Francis Collins. Dawkins asserted that God is simply a delusion. He explained "The question of whether there exists a supernatural creator, a God, is one of the most important that we have to answer. I think that it is a scientific question. My answer is no." Collins disagreed, insisting that science can be compatible with his Christian faith, and that since God cannot be completely contained within nature, God's existence is therefore outside of science's ability to weigh in. Organizations have popped up in support of the theory of Intelligent Design, which is the notion that certain features of the universe and science have been thoughtfully designed by a divine source. The Christian right has been vocal in its promotion of Intelligent Design and the outward faith of its community remains steadfast.

Where do we, as Reform Jews stand on this topic? How might we believe biblical accounts of events such as creation, when modern science seems to contradict our religious heritage?

This question has been asked and debated since as early as the time of the Talmud 1500 years ago. Our sages questioned whether logic and faith could co exist and ultimately agreed that they do go hand-in-hand. We are constantly reminded that the Torah is meant to be understood on many different levels and that it must not always be taken *p'shat*, or literally. In fact, there are four levels of understanding biblical text, one of which is called *Remez*, meaning "hints." *Remez* refers to a hidden or symbolic meaning teaching us that the words in Torah can be a metaphor or allegory for the true meaning.

In relation to the account of creation, even Moses Maimonides, the RAMBAM, understands it in terms of a metaphor.

Modern Jewish scholars have also brought the debate between science and faith into their research. Nathan Aviezer, a Physics Professor at Bar Ilan University is just one example. In his book *In the Beginning...Biblical Creation and Science*, Aviezer asserts that technological advancements have narrowed the gap between physics and Genesis even more than before. In a lengthy explanation of *Beresheit* Aviezer matches each day of the creation account with scientific theories of the universe's origins. We learn that the "day" referred to in Genesis cannot be understood as 24 hours, but rather as specific stages in the development of the world.

So, if logic and God can co-exist within the parameters of our tradition, why aren't we more vocal in our faith and defense of God? Putting scientific debate aside, why do so few Jews outwardly display faith in God or articulate a language of spirituality?

As members of a diverse American society we have come along way in identifying as a people, re-embracing the food, language, and culture that our immigrant ancestors often tried to leave behind in the "old country". We have mainstreamed into society, been given unlimited opportunity, and have succeeded far beyond many other immigrant groups both educationally and economically. There now is a definite pride that goes along with being Jewish, but it is a pride that too often excludes our theology. The generation of Jews finishing each statement with "God willing," or "thank God" appears to have faded away. Perhaps we are concerned with being labeled as ignorant or weak for our beliefs. How many times have you heard comments demeaning religious people, labeling them as using God as a "mental crutch?" I know I have. Maybe we don't speak up out of a concern of sounding too evangelical, which can often be stigmatized as overly religious, conservative, or even backward.

Despite these judgements many Christians have embraced an evangelical lifestyle and feel no shame or embarrassment for doing so. As a teenager a group of my theater friends would conduct a prayer circle before going on stage for the opening act. During our high school lunch hour this same group of students, plus all of the popular football players and cheerleaders, would gather in a classroom for prayer. It was the thing to do. Although I admit feeling pretty left out, I was inspired by how important God was placed in these teenagers' lives and only wished that the other Jews at school would want to do a similar thing.

Rabbi Cohen recently shared a story with me about a transformational experience our teenagers had several years ago while on a trip to Disneyland. At sunset the group gathered for a *havdalah* service outside the Magic Castle. Rabbi Cohen lit the candle and began to sing. The teens sang along almost inaudibly, mortified to be doing something so religiously unique in a public place, God forbid any of their friends saw them. The Rabbi encouraged them to sing loud and proud, and slowly they did. And with their spirits opening up the Disneyland parade crowds gathered around them in interest. Not after long, the teens were no longer afraid, but became liberated in their newfound ability to express their spiritual selves.

But why is it so hard for these teens, let alone us as adults, to outwardly express faith? Maybe our spirituality has turned inward because of the obstacles we have faced as Jews throughout history? Perhaps we would feel more comfortable if we were a religious majority? As Reform Jews do we feel little obligation to visibly identify our theology, and leave this to the more religiously observant communities such as the Orthodox or Chabad? Should we allow any of these reasons to hinder us? It is now the time for us—Reform Jews—to be able to express our faith and celebrate it proudly. I believe, that finally, we are beginning to do this.

While sociological research has maintained there is a large gap in the spiritual emphasis between American Jews and our non-Jewish counterparts, a new trend in increased faith is showing promise for the spiritual lives of the Jewish people.

According to the 2008 National Report on Spirituality conducted and written by Professors Steven Cohen and Lawrence Hoffman of the Hebrew Union College, the historic gap in spiritual orientation is narrowing. Why? Larger percentages of Jewish adults under the age of 35 are identifying as more spiritual than older demographics. The report found that out of 1596 Jewish respondents, 71% believe in God and 61% feel that spiritual growth in their adult life holds some value. I was astounded to read some of the hypotheses for the increased spiritual receptivity among young Jewish adults. Perhaps the most interesting reason is attributed to the increased trend of

intermarried families and Jews by Choice. Those coming into Judaism with a Christian background often bring with them a comfort in expressing faith. These spouses, in turn, render their Jewish relatives and synagogue communities more open to a language of spirituality. In addition, as intermarriage increases American Jews become less of an ethnic group and the focus shifts to theology and spirituality. It makes sense.

What gives you faith? What is it that solidifies your belief in a higher source and how do you articulate it with others? Is it enough to say you believe in God or there other ways that you can show your awe?

For me, science merges the gap between a convoluted modern world and a world simplified by faith. Learning about the various systems of the human body or the millions of unique species in our magnificent world places me in wonder of Adonai. The gigantic document of the human genome spanning a billion letters long fits inside a tiny cell smaller than the head of a pin!

THERE IS A GOD!

Each time I examine science I am inspired to engage others in a conversation of faith.

The words of Exodus chapter 15 sets a beautiful example of our Israelite ancestors outwardly honoring God, using their bodies, voices, and spirits:

Mi Chamocha b'elim Adonai? Mi Kamocha n'edar b'kodesh? Norah tehilot oseh feleh.

Who is like you, Adonai, among other gods?
Who is like you, glorious in holiness,
awesome in praises, doing miracles?

Now, in this new year, is the time for us to raise our voices in songs of praise. Let us open our eyes to be inspired by God's magnificent creation and give abounding gratitude as a Reform Jewish community.

Shanah Tovah!

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