



**1<sup>st</sup> Day Rosh Hashana 5770**  
**Rabbi Heidi M. Cohen**

### **Why Believe? Why Not?**

They call me the Deer Whisperer. Not the usual *nom de plume* for a Rabbi, I would expect, but I acquired this title after an amazing experience leading services this summer at Camp Hess-Kramer in Malibu. Those of you who were here with your young children this morning heard the very story I told, however, it was missing one very incredible part that we just could not reproduce here in the sanctuary.

The story I told was of Reb Yitzee who loved nature so much that he would often take long walks in order to enjoy the sounds, smells and sights of the world. And when Reb Yitzee heard certain sounds, he tried to remember them the best he could so he might use it in a sermon or story of his own. Or even a nigan.

Now imagine that you are sitting in an outdoor chapel in the middle of the Malibu woods with three hundred of your closest and dearest friends. As Matt, Yoni and I sat in the back of the chapel, we noticed a mother deer and her baby wandering through the cabin area.

As I get up to tell the story of Reb Yitzee and his love of nature, I mentioned to all the teens and guests about the deer we saw wandering through the cabin area and what a privilege it is for us to be in this amazing setting to celebrate Shabbat – amongst God’s creation. At this point, I hear some rustling in a bush on the hill behind me. I turn to see if there is anything is there and determine that it must be some campers or counselors returning to the chapel. I continue my story...more rustling. I look to the group and go “shhhh.”

All of a sudden, the mother and her baby deer come jumping out of the bushes and into the chapel. The baby deer continues on its merry way, but the mother stops and stares at the crowd before her. I try to keep everyone quiet and in their seats, but how does one keep teens quiet for the sake of a deer? You don’t! They clap, cheer and are amazed at the timing of this arrival!

I lean against the amud and think to myself, ‘ok, I’m done - I can’t top that!’ Finally, the mother deer decides she is done being in the middle of this story and scampers out of the chapel. Some how, we continue the story and it’s a hit. So much so that the campers sang the niggun for the rest of their three week session and were moved by the deer in their chapel for Shabbat.

Throughout dinner, campers are coming up to me and asking, ‘Rabbi! How did you get the deer to do that?’ They did not accept the fact that this was a random occurrence. After all, these are kids from Hollywood for whom everything must be scripted. So I looked at them and said, ‘what, you didn’t see me call into my *Tallit*: " queue the deer?"’

Why is it so unbelievable for us to sometimes just accept that there are occurrences in our lives and in our world that we do not control? That maybe there was a lesson to be learned from deer just randomly entering our chapel. Maybe it was a moment to bring us to a spiritual epiphany as happened to Jacob when we were to cry out – "God was in this place and I, I did not know it!"

Or perhaps we need to cling to a belief in a rational explanation of all events – after all, we, the camp, took over the territory of these deer, so of course they will be in the chapel and in the camp - it's their space.

But I'm a dreamer, I'm a spiritualist, I'm a believer of the unbelievable, I would like to think that God provided us with the deer to remind us that we are not the only beings in this world and we should not take any of God's creation for granted. We are only a small part of this greater world and we have to remember that we can find God anywhere and in anything.

Take a moment and look into the eyes of someone next to you – whether you know him or her or not. Look deeply into their eyes and you will see the image of God. Go ahead, don't be shy, look....

This can be a very emotional moment full of power to look into the eyes of another person, especially if you do not know him or her. After all, as the proverb says, "The eyes are the window to the soul". Yet sometimes, when we are forced into such an exceptional moment with such strong emotions, we try to laugh it off or make a joke to return ourselves to a comfortable and easy place. Similarly, when it comes to talking about God and our issues of belief, we get a bit uneasy and laugh through the conversation.

Our question today and each day is, why do we believe? And then, after we define this, what do we do with it?

Religion has threaded its way through every age and every culture. But why have humans been so caught up in religious beliefs? What is it that causes us to fill a void with the belief in a great being? How does religion help us cope with our lives?

We hear the cry, 'why me?' or 'why did God allow this to happen?' in times of great trouble or turmoil. Why do we never hear, 'I live in the wealthiest country in the world and have never gone hungry? – why me?' or 'You know, my parents were good, kind people and treated me with love – why me?' The blessings we receive we accept as our due, our right. Yet, when there seems to be injustice, we turn to God and say, 'why me?'

Starting with the great Sumerian epic story of Gilgamesh and his failed quest for immortality, and with thousands of other early man stories, thinkers and poets have all proclaimed death to be our greatest fear - we want to know what will happen after we die. Without that answer, we are scared for what may be or may not be. Yet religion offers a promise that death is not the end. This hope relieves the terror of the unknown for a moment before we start to wrestle with what the next life might be.

Where did this all start? Where did religion first begin? No one can say for sure, since it predates written history. Yet, we wonder if it is something that emerged from our genes or is religion a culturally conditioned behavior – do we have a deep sense of needing to choose to be religious? What was the conditioned behavior that brought us here this morning? What was it that caused us to get up and say, we must be in Temple today and on Yom Kippur at the very least?

Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that religion is what we do with our wonder – the wonder of the world around us - especially when we were children and were in wonder of the butterfly who flapped its wings so close to our face. Awe, amazement and the sheer exhilaration of existence animates faith. However, Heschel suggests that "The statement 'God is' is an understatement" because that truth is overwhelming – it's too much for us to believe that God just, "is."

So we have to ask, do we believe only that which is tangible – that which we can see, touch or measure? Do we believe that there can be an intangible reality? And are we comfortable asking if we believe there is a mystery at the heart of the universe that we will never be able to fully understand – that we just have to accept that there are some things in life that we are never meant to understand? How much of our lives take place in the elusive spaces of this world and how much is conveyed like the artistry of a great musician - in the silence between the notes?

Is the tangible that we hold on to when considering religion more about fear of our own immortality? Does it arise more when we are sick, scared or when life presents us with turbulent moments that we seek something greater than ourselves in order to find answers? Does fear equal faith?

Of course, there are two sides to this argument. One is, “I am an atheist because of reason.” And the atheist would argue that those who believe do so because of such issues like having an unsupportive family or out of fear or weakness. For the atheist, the world must be filled with weak, gullible believers. Luckily for all of you, I don't subscribe to this theory.

Yet it is out of our faith that we find strength and even some answers. When we pray when we are sick, our prayer is not answered because we get better, it's answered because we are able to better cope with our illness. When we pray because we hit turbulence in our lives, our prayer is not answered because life is made easy again, it is answered because we find strength in our faith and with God to be able to deal with the curve ball thrown into our life. And when we pray in a community, we are strengthened because we know we are not alone.

Rather than fear being the reason for the origin of faith, George Meredith wrote: “Who ever rises from his prayer a better [person], [their] prayer is answered.” Spiritual aspiration is a likelier orientation of religion – we want to be better than who we are at this moment. Martin Buber reinforces this thought with his I-Thou relationship discussion. We are naturally in relationships with others, from family to friends, and the quality of our lives are tied to our relationships with others. Hence, being a part of a religious community, like we are here today, comes from the desire to be close to others and God is the source of all of these relationships. We all came here this morning rather than finding a quiet place where we can be alone. We sought out one another and to be here in this room together reaching out to God and asking God to be partners with us.

As believers, we feel that we are not alone in this world. What we forget, God remembers; what we experience, God understands. There are times that the world may seem cruel, but it is never empty – we are never alone. And from this, we create the stories of our faith. And throughout the story, we seek our co-lead actor to join us – God. It's like the story of the Chasidic rabbi's son who would wander out into the forest to spend time alone. His father asked, “son, why do you go out to the forest by yourself?” The boy replied, “so I can find God.” “But son, you don't have to go out to find God, don't you know that God is the same everywhere?” “Yes,” says the boy, “but I'm not.”

We are in search of God in the places where we are. God may be the same in every place, but we are not the same. We are wives and husbands. We are mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons. We are workers and we are caregivers. In every place we are, we are different and in every situation, we seek answers to what is happening in our lives and with who we are at that moment. We are seeking God like we sought out God in the eyes of the person sitting next to us. And we are seeking answers and reasons for all that exists and why it works the way it does.

Yet it is through the trials in our lives that we seek answers to why bad things happen or why we must endure some pain in our lives. However, our quest is not a search for an explanation to our issues, rather, it is a quest for how to respond. The response is our basis for why we pray and how we pray. Our response is based on reaching for a higher level with God in knowing that we can never prevent bad things from ever happening. Yet we seek a promise through our faith with God that we will gather the strength and the faith to create meaning from our trials and even from our losses. Not every prayer can find answers, but every soul can find solace in prayer. And in our prayer are the stories of our tradition that capture essential truths.

Consider the parables - the boy who was told to go out and shake out all the feathers from his pillow and then go collect them again so that he can learn that all that comes out of our mouths can never be put back again. That words can either heal or hurt. Or what about the tales of the miraculous – Nachshon, just a plain man on the shores of the sea of Reeds with the Israelites, who because of his faith that God would not just leave the Israelites to die at the hands of Pharaoh and his army or drown in the sea, was the first to step into the roaring waves declaring God’s greatness. It was because of his faith that God opened the sea for the Israelites to pass through on dry land. These stories and parables passed on from one generation to the next remind us that faith is not just to be seen with our eyes, but rather a reminder that one who sees only with his or her eyes misses much of what is happening in life. It is not enough for us to say, ‘I know how this works and I don’t need to believe.’

A scientist once wrote a letter to God saying, “Thank you so much for creating the world. We appreciate all You did for us then, but now that we understand how it all works, we no longer need You. Goodbye!” To which God responded, “I appreciate your words of thanks, but if this is so, and you feel you can do every thing I can, please prove it. Can you create a human from dust just as I did?” The scientist said, “of course.” He bent down to take some dust to begin work and at that moment God said, “Not so fast - get your own dust!”

As we pray today and as we pray each day, each Shabbat and each holy day, we wrestle with this relationship we are supposed to have with God.

Why have faith? Why pray? Why believe? Why not? We must try to let go of the need for the concrete answers to life and embrace the emotional strength we receive from our prayers. We can answer these questions with statistics that show such results as:

- Marriages in which both spouses frequently attend religious services are 2.4 times less likely to end in divorce and that a Duke University research project found that religious attendance is a most important predictor of marriage stability.  
Or
- Men who attend religious services weekly are 50% less likely to commit acts of violence against their wives.  
Or
- W. Bradford Wilcox from the University of Virginia found that a father’s religious attendance was positively associated with involvement in activities with their children.  
Or
- Arthur Books of Syracuse University found that religious individuals were 40% more likely than their secular counterparts to give money to charity and more than twice as likely to volunteer.  
Or
- 87 of over 100 studies reviewed concluded that religious practice is significantly correlated with reduced incidences of suicide and depression.

Religion, prayer, and faith increases social stability, enables us to live happier, be more charitable with not only money but also our time, and have more productive and better lives. It may not answer our questions about God’s existence, but it does give us the support to say, faith and religion, being here today, reminds us that we are creatures who are designed to flourish, to heal and help, and be partners in this greater world, especially when we have faith.

When Primo Levi wrote his memories of living in Auschwitz, he tells a story of reaching out of his bunker window to remove an icicle for some water. A guard snatched it from him and Primo asked, “why?” The guard said to him, “Here there is no why.” Primo reminds us that there is no universe if there is no why – that is actually the greatest fear we face in our lives. Hence, if there is no God, then maybe, there is no why.

Faith is believing in the legitimacy of asking, “why.”

Why did the deer show up that Shabbat evening? I don’t know, but she reminded me that I am in awe of the moment of sensing God’s presence.

Temple Beth Sholom  
2625 N. Tustin Ave. Santa Ana, CA 92705  
Phone: 714-628-4600 • Fax: 714-628-4619  
Email: [information@tbsoc.com](mailto:information@tbsoc.com)  
<http://www.TBSOC.com/>