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“Dreaded Dread”

Does anyone else find this Gallup poll revelation hard to believe? It revealed that “more Americans would vote for a homosexual for president than for an atheist.” ([footnote 1](#))

This seems like a good crowd to mention this to – perhaps someone in our midst would make a good presidential candidate!

Not that I assume that you are all God-believers just because you’re in shul on Yom Kippur. No more than I believe you are all homosexuals just because you’re in *our* shul on Yom Kippur.

But back to this poll, I mentioned.

The article that reported the Gallup poll results (which are already a few years old -1999) also quoted sociologist Penny Edgell, whose research is about religion and faith in America. Edgell says that atheists “are seen as a threat to the American way of life by a large portion of the American public.” [Adler, Newsweek 9/11/06 p. 47 1st column] In fact, setting aside for a moment the homosexual for president question, the numbers of people *willing* to vote for an atheist for president is in fact shrinking – a recent Newsweek poll put it at 37% who said they would vote for an atheist vs. the 1999 poll where 49% would still have considered putting an atheist in the White House. Those statistics are enough to put the fear of God into any self-respecting presidential candidate -- atheist or not!

When I was in Jr. high I wasn’t an atheist myself, but I was even then what you might call an atheist sympathizer. I asked permission to write a series of articles for the school newspaper on God in the public life – why the heck, for example, does it say “in God we trust” on our money? What’s that about? The faculty advisor declined my offer – too controversial.

Maybe that’s why I became a rabbi – freedom of the pulpit and all – I can say anything I want from here.... oh oh - you should have seen the look Brett just gave me!

Does anyone here besides me find our atheist vs voters poll unsettling? Frankly, I think I might jump at the chance to vote for an atheist for president. I like the idea of someone who thinks saving the world is all up to us, and isn’t hoping, expecting, waiting around for God to step in. Of course I do realize that many God believing elected officials also take responsibility for repairing the world, but you see my point anyway, don’t you? There is no reason not to have an atheist as president providing the person is qualified in every other way. Among other things, it would make the separation of church and state easier.

I came home a few weeks ago to find a business card slipped under our front door from a detective at the LAPD Joint Terrorism Task Force – no note, just a business card with a phone number written in. I wasn't sure what to do with it.

The next day I was working in my study at home when the doorbell rang. I was expecting Fran and Daniel for one of our marathon service planning meetings, so I didn't look out the window to see who was there, I just flung the door open and was surprised to discover a very tall, nicely dressed, good looking man who had a badge and id in his hand to show me that he was a special agent of the FBI (not that I would have known had it been a false badge and ID – how would I know what an FBI badge looks like?). Anyway, he asked if I owned a blue Volvo, which I do, and if I might know who had been driving it a few weeks ago (just before September 11) in the valley when it was reported that some middle eastern looking men were seen videotaping around some financial buildings on Ventura Blvd. and that they sped away when the witness appeared to be looking hard at them.

They had found us through the license plate, of course. Tracy and I usually leave our beat up blue Volvo over at BCC, so that Tim, BCC's custodian can use it for BCC errands. Tall blonde Tim doesn't look too middle eastern though, so I didn't think it could be him.

I started to tell the agent all this – I'm rabbi at a synagogue over on Pico, just west of Fairfax. He shook his knowingly – I know who you are, he said, I did some homework before I came over here. By then Fran had walked in and I started to introduce her – he knew who she was too. I showed him the business card left the day before, he knew who Fran and I were, but he *didn't* know his colleague whose name on the card! He had me call the detective back. Turns out he was investigating the same incident, but neither of them knew the other nor did they know the other agency was also investigating. So much for Joint Terrorism Task Force.

We soon solved the mystery, by the way, when I realized it was the week we had loaned the car to our visitors from the Czech Republic– the teachers and student from Choteborsh who came in August to exhibit their Holocaust project at the Museum of the Holocaust, and who spoke at BCC after services one Friday night. Although it was hard to imagine how any of those 3 very white, very European, not Jewish looking guys could be mistaken for Middle Easterners, I did know they'd been videotaping everywhere they went in order to show their families and students when they got back home. It happens all the time, the FBI agent told me – pretty much if you're not blonde, you can be mistaken for a middle easterner.

Case closed. The detective and the agent could not have been nicer, or more polite. I trusted them immediately and ongoingly. And although they were a little embarrassed to discover they were simultaneously working on the same minor and easily explained citizen report, both talked to me about how they had to follow up on all the many calls like this that come in, and that most are nothing. I felt safe, taken care of, like they were on my side – I still think that.

It wasn't until later that I thought to myself – why did that not even phase you? Any

number of aspects of it: that they already knew so much about me; that they were a little bit Keystone Cops not in their manner or professionalism – that was really impressive – but in the fact they both were working on the same minor incident; that so much work had gone into it on both their parts – tracking down the license, 2 in-person visits from one of them and one from the other, phone calls to me and then to each other, filing reports – and who knows what else.

For all those questionable aspects, I still felt oddly safer – why is that? Because they were nice? Because they seemed professional? Because they worried enough to check out a story? Because it turned out to be an innocent situation?

Are we safer because there are officers of the law out there doing stuff like this? Is that really what we want our Homeland Terrorism guys to be doing, our tax dollars, and our budget deficits to be funding?

These examples of anti-atheism, and extraordinary homeland terrorism pursuits are minor examples – amusing examples even -- that speak to a bigger picture, bigger problem. How fear-based our nation has become; and how so many of us operate in the world from a similar base of fear. Not that there isn't much to fear. On Erev Rosh Hashana and again last night I spoke of real reasons to feel fear, to be afraid – global warming and all its implications and the dangers Israel finds itself in, and by extension Jews everywhere.

We could take a quick poll here this morning – how many of us in this past year have a friend or relative or are ourselves facing a life threatening ailment or treatment? How many experienced financial setbacks or crises? Job loss or continued unemployment or a scary diagnosis or a divorce? How many know someone who died by accident? Or suddenly? How many know someone who died this past year “before their time,” as our liturgy phrases it?

And those are among the close up and personal scary events. What about globally? One of my colleagues wrote for her Rosh Hashanah drash this summary of the world just now. She wrote:

And yet, to be honest, I think this has been a hell of a hard year even for the most optimistic among us. As we look beyond our individual lives, to all the unnecessary carnage in Iraq, we are appalled by the estimated 2,455 Americans dead, the over 100,000 Iraqi civilians dead; And the estimated 19,000 to 48,000 Americans returning without arms, legs, or eyes.

Add this to the horror of Darfur, the AIDS epidemic in India, Africa, Russia, and China – During 2005 around four million adults and children became infected with HIV. By the end of the year, an estimated 38.6 million people worldwide will be living with HIV/AIDS. The year also saw around three million deaths from AIDS, despite recent improvements in access to anti-retro-viral treatment. Africa alone has **12 million** AIDS orphans.

On top of this, we see the rise in militant fundamentalism, Anti-Semitism, Anti-Arabism,

Terrorism, and the recent War in Israel, Lebanon, Gaza. *Our president is trying to erode America's longstanding commitment that torture is [absolutely] reprehensible.* ([footnote 2](#))

Her list stops there, but we could all think of things to add to it. But actually I'm not trying to make a comprehensive list here, or to scare you to death, but rather I just want quickly and somewhat randomly to remind us that if we sometimes feel dread these days, or anxiety, it's not without cause.

On top of the reasons to dread, there comes the *permission* to dread – in the form of the liturgy for the Days of Awe. Who shall live and who shall die? who when their time comes and who before or after their time? If on Rosh Hashanah we were written into the Book of Life (and the only ones for whom we know the answer to that question are those who died on or since Rosh Hashanah). Even if we were written into the Book on Rosh Hashanah, the question of Yom Kippur still remains – will we be *sealed* in that Book of Life at the end of the day today? Even the imagery of the gates of repentance staying open, slowly closing during the course of this day or, some say, this coming week brings some anxiety (of course since it's a Jewish tradition—there are differing opinions about how long the gate stays open, how wide open it is, how fast it's moving. But if you've ever tried to get in or out of a subway car or elevator or electric gate when the doors are closing – you might know the feeling – the liturgists, however, would prefer you to imagine something that looks and moves more like the doors of this beautiful ark.)

As you read the liturgy over the course of this day, notice the opportunities to feel dread, to feel anxiety, including the name of these 10 days – *Yamim Noraim* –usually and accurately translated as Days of Awe, but the term also means “Days of Fear.” Just the fact that the Hebrew word *Yirah* means both fear and awe tells you something about Judaism's view of God and life, and what these holy days are for.

But while you're at it, while you're reflecting on the dread, begin to reflect also on why it's there, and what our liturgy offers to alleviate and assuage it. For why it's in the liturgy, I think, is the same reason I'm bringing it up – not to scare us, not to make it worse, for I well know – and Judaism does too – that it's bad enough already for us. Judaism and I don't need or want to make it worse for us -- rather we want to validate what we are already feeling, we want to acknowledge that dread exists, and exists with cause, with reasons. If you're feeling dread or anxiety lately, if you're feeling vulnerable and a bit shaky, you have plenty of reason to feel that way – life in our times, just like life when most of our liturgy was written – just like life always – life is a fragile place to be – a delicate balance – can I say this more elegantly? -- a crap shoot.

So a few moments ago I mentioned “alleviate and assuage.” That Jewish tradition in general – and Yom Kippur in particular come along to validate and then to soothe. How?

For one, look around you – we're all in this together. We share the responsibility, we share the pain, we share too the joys of life.

Two, consider our *unetantah tokef* prayer – oy, again?

U'tshuvah u'tefilah u'tzadakah – renewal, prayer and right action – it's not that they avert the severe decree, as our translation reads, but as our friend and rabbinical student Rachel Timoner taught us on 2nd day Rosh Hashanah it's that those actions and behaviours -- actions and behaviours over which we *do have* some control – will help us navigate through the rough waters, through the storms that life rains down upon us.

And I would add to her comforting and helpful explanation – it is deliberately actions that require both a turning inward – self-examination, self-understanding -- and a turning outward – to help others, to be in community, to help heal the world. Doing those things recalibrates the anxiety level, disperses the dread. If you don't believe me – try it. Whether you believe in God or are an atheist running for president – take time to meditate or pray or exercise every day. Put coins in your tzedakah pushkes, and into the hands of people on the street asking for a little help. Study some Jewish texts – preferably with someone else (preferably come study at BCC – lots of teachers, lots of offerings coming right up). Come to services even after the Days of Awe – see what a routine or even just an occasional sampling of music and prayer and congregation can do for you. Take in new things – notice them – stop and remark on them – to yourself or to others. Are you getting the picture?

In a few minutes we'll be reading an amazing passage from the book of Deuteronomy. Take the messages home with you, for they are among the main messages of Yom Kippur and of Judaism.

A first message comes here:

"Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, 'who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?' NO, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." [EX 30.11-14] IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART-- YOU CAN SPEAK IT AND TASTE IT AND FEEL IT. It's yours to examine and reflect upon and understand and live by.

And that's where the second message comes in:

"I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse...therefore choose life, that you might live..." *u'vakharta ba-chayim*.

We've already established that life and death – heartbeat or no heartbeat, breath or no breath - is not always ours to choose. So it can't be that that's what our biblical author meant here. So what does *U'vakharta ba-chayim* – therefore choose life – really mean? It means while you are alive, choose to *be* alive; take actions that might lead to your feeling alive while you are alive. You see? Judaism thought up cognitive behavior therapy long ago – whether you feel like doing it or not, do what should be good for you or for someone else or for the world, don't do what won't be good. Choose positive behaviors, not

negative ones. Good ones over bad ones – blessing over curse. That much *is your* choice, says our tradition, and it's betting that such action will help – will actually make you feel better, maybe even feel *good*.

Try it – what do you have to lose? I know I'm making it sound easier, more satisfying than it may turn out to be for some of you. And I don't mean to underplay the depth or pain you might be in. I only mean to say – try it – the prescription comes with no promises, no guarantees, just some good testimonials from generations of Jews who have gone before you.

Let me leave you this morning with a verse from one of our best Jewish liturgists, Leonard Cohen. Think of it perhaps as a way to do *tshuvah* – to turn around – an attitude. It's the refrain of his song "Anthem."[\(footnote 3\)](#)

"There is a crack, a crack in everything;

That's how the light gets in."

May the light pour in on you, on us, on the world this new year. G'mar tov – may you be sealed in the Book of Life for a year of life, of ease, of joy, of feeling.

ANTHEM

(from the album 'THE FUTURE')

The birds they sang
at the break of day
Start again
I heard them say
Don't dwell on what
has passed away
or what is yet to be.

Ah the wars they will
be fought again
The holy dove
She will be caught again
bought and sold
and bought again
the dove is never free.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

We asked for signs
the signs were sent:
the birth betrayed
the marriage spent
Yeah the widowhood
of every government --
signs for all to see.

I can't run no more
with that lawless crowd
while the killers in high places
say their prayers out loud.
But they've summoned, they've summoned up
a thundercloud
and they're going to hear from me.

Ring the bells that still can ring ...

You can add up the parts
but you won't have the sum
You can strike up the march,
there is no drum
Every heart, every heart
to love will come
but like a refugee.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.
That's how the light gets in.

Written by Leonard Cohen, Stranger Music Inc. (BMI).

Footnotes

1. A 1999 Gallup poll reported in a recent article “The New Naysayers” by Jerry Adler, Newsweek 9/11/06 p.47 ([back to top](#))

2. Rabbi Camille Shira Angel, Cong. Sha’ar Zahav, San Francisco, Erev Rosh Hashanah 5767 ([back to top](#))

3. Written by Leonard Cohen, Stranger Music Inc. (BMI) ANTHEM
(from the album 'THE FUTURE') ([back to top](#))