

**“THIS I BELIEVE”**  
**Yom Kippur Morning Sermon**  
**September 30, 2017 - 10 Tishri 5778**  
**Rabbi Daniel Treiser**

I used to say that I was a news junkie. If you got into my car, it was turned to one news station or another, which of course my children hated. I subscribed to newspapers, Time Magazine, newspapers online from Israel, and more. Over the last several years I’ve let that addiction fade, partially due to finally having a car with satellite radio, but in reality, more because I can’t stand listening to it anymore for all the reasons most of us today can understand.

NPR, however remains a relative favorite. I admit that I miss Diane Rehm. I’m still a fan of Morning Edition, All Things Considered and Weekend Edition. It was on those news programs about a dozen years ago that I first heard a feature called “This I Believe.” The producers of the segment invited people from all walks of life: celebrities, politicians, academics, every position and every socio-economic level, to write a brief essay on their core beliefs, the values that guide their lives, what mattered most. Many of these five-minute essays were recorded and broadcast on the news programs. The series itself ran only for about five years, but you can still find many of the recordings and essays on a website called, appropriately enough, [www.thisibelieve.org](http://www.thisibelieve.org).

The series was actually not new. It was based upon another series that ran on public radio in the early 1950s. That program was created by Edward R. Murrow in the climate of fear and paranoia during the Cold War and the McCarthy Era. Each week millions of people would gather around their radios to listen to messages of hope from luminaries like Eleanor Roosevelt and Helen Keller as well as common women and men.

As I was researching this, I actually stumbled upon a recording of Murrow's introduction to the series. As I listened to that famous voice, I couldn't help but think how the world he describes, and the need for encouraging statements of belief, sounds familiar.

"This I Believe. By that name, we present the personal philosophies of thoughtful men and women in all walks of life. In this brief space, a banker or a butcher, a painter or a social worker, people of all kinds who need have nothing more in common than integrity, a real honesty, will write about the rules they live by, the things they have found to be the basic values in 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 market place while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply.

Around us all, now high like a distant thunderhead, now close upon us with the wet choking intimacy of a London fog, there is an enveloping cloud of fear. There is a physical fear, the kind that drives some of us to flee our homes and burrow into the ground in the bottom of a Montana valley like prairie dogs, to try to escape, if only for a little while, the sound and the fury of the A-bombs or the hell-bombs, or whatever may be coming.

There is a mental fear, which provokes others of us to see the images of witches in a neighbor's yard and stampedes us to burn down this house. And there is a creeping fear of doubt, doubt of what we have been taught, of the validity of so many things we had long since taken for granted to be durable and unchanging. It has become more difficult than ever to distinguish black from white, good from evil, right from wrong.

What truths can a human being afford to furnish the cluttered nervous room of his mind with, when he has no real idea how long a lease he has on the future? It is to try to meet the challenge of such questions that we have prepared these pieces. It has been a difficult task and a

delicate one. Except for those who think in terms of pious platitudes or dogma or narrow prejudice (and those thoughts we aren't interested in), people don't speak their beliefs easily, or publicly...

Perhaps we should warn you that there is one thing you won't read, and that is a pat answer for the problems of life. We don't pretend to make this a spiritual or psychological patent-medicine chest where one can come and get a pill of wisdom, to be swallowed like an aspirin, to banish the headaches of our times.

This reporter's beliefs are in a state of flux. It would be easier to enumerate the items I do not believe in, than the other way around. And yet in talking to people, in listening to them, I have come to realize that I don't have a monopoly on the world's problems. Others have their share, often far bigger than mine. This has helped me to see my own in truer perspective: and in learning how others have faced their problems--this has given me fresh ideas about how to tackle mine." <sup>1</sup>

Reflecting on my own beliefs, I came to an interesting realization. Believe it or not, this is my tenth High Holiday season with you in Clearwater, the beginning of my tenth year here. And throughout that time, in sermons, in classrooms and workshops, in conversations and discussions, I often teach what JUDAISM has to say, what our heritage encourages or suggests we believe. While I might let my own personal views slip in from time to time, and clearly when I teach I do so through my own lens and biases, I've never really shared my own theology, my own thoughts and views in a succinct way.

So I thought I would share with you this morning, my response to "This I Believe."

Traditionally, when we discuss philosophical thought in Judaism, we tend to use three categories to clarify one's beliefs: God, Torah and Israel. I think that is a good model to use in this instance as well.

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/murrow\\_transcript.html](http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/murrow_transcript.html)

What I won't do is describe my theology as non-dualist Aristotelian thinker influenced by Hegelian thought with a touch of Buber and Rosenzweig through in, because a- I had to do that in rabbinic school, b- I have absolutely no idea what those terms mean anymore, and c- I don't suppose it's helpful for you, either. Let me just be simple.

So, this I believe about God. I believe that God exists. While it might seem to be an occupational hazard to not have that belief, I do know many fine rabbis who do not. I believe in God as an ever-living presence in our universe and in our lives. But that presence exists in two ways. First, God exists outside of us as an external force, surrounding us always. I believe that I know that presence is there, but it is a power I cannot touch, cannot feel, cannot tap into. For me, God's presence in our world is omnipotent and omnipresent, yet does not act within our world. God is the source of all Creation, yet not in the biblical sense of seven days (more on that later.) And as the Creator, part of the rules of the created universe is that God doesn't interfere. God doesn't cause hurricanes or floods or volcanoes to happen deliberately as punishment- they happen because that are simply built into the natural system and order of the world. Change, evolution, and yes even destructive forces, follow the rules of nature, set in play when Creation began. Of course, we have played a hand in them through the choices of humanity that change the climate, alter the forces of nature, or inspire us to live on shorelines below sea level. Similarly, I do NOT believe God causes illness or death as punishment or for lack of faith. They occur because we are mortal, we are fragile, sometimes for no reason at all save that they do. All these things happen because they are, simply put, part of the human condition, which we sometimes influence through our personal choices. Simply put,

I believe that God does not independently function in our daily world. God watches, God observes, God cares, but does not act through this first level of existence.

I did say, though, that there are two levels of God's existence. The second one is internal. I believe that there is a part of the Divine within each and every one of us as human beings. In Judaism we might call that our *neshama*, our soul. It is the piece of me, the piece of you, that strives to act with compassion, to act morally. It's what allows me to form relationships with others, to love. And it is the part of me that pushes me to be the best I can, to live up the potential that exists in each of us. When Judaism teaches that humanity is created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God, this is the part of me, of you, of each of us, that reflects that divinity. And it is through that part of us that is God, that God DOES play a more active role in our world. This is the emanation of God to which I pray for forgiveness on Yom Kippur, because the sins and mistakes of the past year are the times I failed to live up to those divine expectations.

Let me explain this further: A large part of this thinking came in my Hebrew grammar class when I learned that the word to pray, *l'hitpalel*, is reflexive... it is directed inward. When I pray, I don't ask for the external presence to magically make something happen. I pray to find the strength in me and in others to make that reality come to be. So, for example, when I pray for healing, I don't ('usually') expect to miraculously recover or get better. For me, I pray that I find the strength inside me to face my struggle, that my body finds a way to win out. I pray that my medical providers draw deep upon their insight, skills and talents to bring healing to my body. I pray that my family and my community have the compassion and understanding to help me heal. For me, that IS God making a difference in my world.

And I also believe that this *neshama*, this Divine presence within us, is eternal. When we die, like waters rolling back to the sea, the *neshama* returns to the Wellspring, continues to live on in the presence of God in our universe.

Of course, there are moments when this belief becomes a bit shaky. Yes, I too have moments when I want to reach out and say, “Please God, make me better, or let the report be a good one.” There are things that seem to happen with no discernable reason other than the idea that there’s some force guiding them to happen. Barbara and I have a debate at least once a month that ends with her saying, “See, things happen for a reason, and you can’t explain it.” And that’s true. Moments like these, moments when my desire for a miracle, moments that seem almost supernatural shake my belief, make me rethink it all. And that’s OK. One of my favorite teachings in our tradition, one I HAVE shared with you, is that the word Israel means “to struggle with God.” We don’t have a simple, unified theology in Judaism. My belief finds a home in Judaism as do beliefs that are totally different. To be the people of Israel I believe means to struggle constantly with our beliefs, thoughts and relationships with God, and discover new ones. Belief in God will evolve and change over the years, and that’s fine. My belief today isn’t what it was when I started rabbinic school nor is it what it was when I was ordained. It will continue to evolve as I struggle with God.

This I believe about Torah. What I believe about Torah probably stands most directly in conflict with traditional Judaism. The traditional understanding is that the words on the scroll we read moments ago were revealed to Moses by God on Mount Sinai, and transcribed there. They are perfect, absolutely true and unchanging over the course of millennia into our hands today. As a rationalist, I

always had a hard time with that one. My belief about Torah is influenced heavily by my upbringing and my training within the Reform movement. Last night, Rabbi Levy mentioned the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums*, the rational school of Jewish thought borne of the Enlightenment in Germany. One of the great contributions of the *Wissenschaft* was to explore the biblical text from a non-religious point of view. And it helped me understand the Bible not as Divine word, but rather a human document, a text that also was created and evolved over many, many years. But that's not to say that it is simply a book, something we can easily discard. Torah relates the answers our ancestors had to the whys and hows of our world. They tell, not a history, but OUR story, our understanding of where we came from. They teach, with inspiration from the Divine within, what a relationship within the community of the Jewish people is to God, what it means to live guided by principles and values that have kept us alive throughout the ages as other peoples faded and disappeared. And though it is formed by human hands, I believe it is inspired by the Divine presence within the authors. I know that it is not always easy to read Torah in this way. When we retell the story of Abraham or Sarah we read it as if it truly happened, even though I don't personally believe that to be the case. However, I look to the story for morals. I see Abraham's debate with God as a lesson to stand up and preserve the dignity of life. I read Sarah's strong will as a reminder to preserve our families from challengers and obstacles. Isaiah may never have stood in the town square preaching the word of God, but is his call for the fast of the righteous any less valid? Does not his message to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the poor ring true for us this morning because it is the right thing to do, and has been taught to the generations before us? That is the beauty and wisdom of Torah for me.

And that is also the challenge. Because we do not simply accept the words of Torah with dogmatic faith, I believe that I must choose how to make it apply to my life. It would be much easier to say, for example, that I don't eat pork or shellfish or mix meat and dairy because God tells me not to and that's the belief system to which I adhere. It's much harder for me as a Reform Jew to question whether these or other mitzvot are relevant to me, are practices I want to keep, whether out of sense of commandedness, adherence to an ancient tradition, or just because it is the right thing to do. Because of what Torah has meant for our people for two thousand years, I can no more simply discard it than I can adhere to it with blind faith. For me, Torah is the guide, the lesson, the voice of history that continues to inform and challenge my actions.

This I Believe about Israel. I want to share my thoughts on two of the many meanings of the word. The first is Israel as a people. In this sense, I view it synonymously with the word Jew. To be a part of the people of Israel is to understand that we are bound together by a tradition of more than two thousand years, whether we are born into it, chose it for ourselves, or support our family members who live a Jewish life. To be a part of Israel for me is to know that the teachings of Torah guided and shaped us, from the foods we eat to the holidays we celebrate today. To be a part of Israel is to know that, though there are those in this world even today who despise and hate us for no reason, we are a part of a culture that has shaped and built the world in which we live through our contributions. Though Judaism spread around the world and was influenced by countless cultures, there are still the unique treasures that we all share, and a bond that makes us feel closer, even if just a little bit, to another “MOT” – Member of the Tribe.

To be a part of Israel also comes I believe, with obligations. Obligations to one another as fellow Jews, obligations to studying and debating those same lessons of Torah in a search for relevance in our modern lives, and yes a sense of obligation to one another to maintain and perpetuate our cultural community. We were taught hundreds of years ago, “*Kol Yisrael aravim zeh bazeh...* All Israel is responsible for one another.” The lesson remains true, for without one another, a community fades from existence.

However we define what it means to be a part of the People of Israel, what is MOST ESSENTIAL is that WE are the ones defining it. Throughout history, those who sought to destroy us labeled us, defined us, and forced their way upon us. In today’s world, with marchers proclaiming in the streets of Virginia, “Jews will not replace us,” it is more important than ever that WE define our Judaism for ourselves.

Of course, Israel also means that little sliver of land on the shore of the Mediterranean. But what does that tiny nation represent? For me, as I believe I have made clear over the years here, it is the undisputed home of our people. It is the land from which I draw inspiration to think of the dreams of two thousand years realized in modernity. It is a place where I cannot walk without feeling the blessing, and the burden of history with every step. It is the land that instilled a renewed sense of my personal Judaism that allowed me to more confidently become a rabbi. It is the place where I step off the plane and feel a sense of being at home like no place else in the world, because I see and feel Judaism alive on the streets, in the shops, on TV and on the beach in a way you simply cannot experience anywhere else.

But the state of Israel is also a place of consternation of disappointment for me. I want Israel to be a place that embodies the Jewish values I cherish in how it treats

others, Jews and non-Jews alike. I want to feel true religious freedom as a liberal Jew for ALL Jews, not oppressed by my Orthodox brothers and sisters. I want to know that the dignity of human life is preserved right alongside the need for security. And I want her to be a nation led by leaders who understand that the need for these values outweighs their own needs for power and success. Israel today is so much the nation I needed her to be for my own exploration of history and tradition, but she is not yet the nation I believe she can truly aspire to be.

And I want YOU to understand Israel better. I want you to explore her, to feel the sense of home, to be amazed, to be challenged, and yes be disappointed by the modern State. I want you to come with me next year. Nearly 80 members of our Temple family have traveled with me to Israel over these 9 years. Next June, let's explore it together. Some basic information about the trip is now online at the website on the back of your worship supplement, and I'll be hosting an informational meeting about the trip in a month. PLEASE, come with me to Israel.

So my contribution to "This I Believe" is a bit longer than Mr. Murrow would've allowed. That's my prerogative on the bimah I guess. And I'm aware that sharing my beliefs opens up the door to many challenges and questions. How does my concept of God influence the prayers I read in the machzor or prayerbook? How do I find true relevance in every word of Torah and tradition? What if my belief doesn't match yours? These are good questions, worthy of exploration. My hope this morning was not to simply preach my beliefs and make you accept or reject them. This is the beginning of a conversation. I hope we can continue to explore these themes in services and adult education classes in the years to come. And I want you to think about what YOU believe, what matters most to you. Write your own essay... what do YOU believe? It can be about God, Torah and Israel. Or it can be whatever core values guide your life. I've created a new email address because I

want to hear from you. Send it to me at [believe@tbclearwater.org](mailto:believe@tbclearwater.org). Let me know if I can share them in the bulletin or the weekly e-news blast. I'll try to respond and open the conversation further.

Yom Kippur is a day of looking back, reflecting on the year past and considering our deeds. But we do so with an eye towards the new year, hoping that it is one filled with goodness, health and blessing. May this New Year also be one that is guided by values, by commitment, by morals and by all that we believe. AMEN.