

LEO BAECK CENTRE

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קהלה קדושה שמע ישראל

A congregant sent me a message a few days ago:

G'mar chatima tova (and since they thoughtfully translated it as 'may you be inscribed in the book of life' I presume I was not the only person they sent it to!).

In a very helpful, educational and ecumenical manner, they continued that 'According to Jewish tradition, between Rosh Hashana (the new year) and Yom Kippur (the day of atonement) God decides who will live in the coming year and who will die.

Hence the good wishes above.

They concluded with some very timely information: the eve of the day of atonement this year is 4 October.

So - here we are!

I thanked them and extended my good wishes to them - but pointed out that I don't believe 'God decides' at all! If that was the case, God would be responsible for someone dying in an accident, or the floods in Pakistan - or the Holocaust! Indeed this is exactly what some fundamentalist clerics claimed was the reason for the Boxing Day Tsunami. God had punished these Indonesians, Malaysians, Sri Lankans for not being devout enough!

It would be easy to brush them off as poorly educated Muslim leaders, but more than half a century before the tsunami, some fundamentalist Jews developed the explanation that the Holocaust was God's punishment for Progressive Judaism, cleverly noting that it developed largely in Germany - where the Nazis then arose to

blot it out. It is a disgusting slander, and a blasphemy - and besides, it was their own communities in the Pale of Settlement, in Russia, Poland, Lithuania, who bore the brunt of the destruction. So no, I do not believe, for a moment, that God ever decides to take lives at all.

This is not a new position for me - I have not suddenly seen - or, depending on your point of view, lost - the light! I know this with certainty, because when I was a student at the Leo Baeck College forty years ago, and it was suffering another financial crisis, the students came up with some fund-raising ideas. One was to sell New Year cards! I objected to the line 'Lshanah tovah tikateivu v'teikhateimu - may you be written and sealed in the book of life, which I didn't think was appropriate for a Progressive Rabbinical Seminary to promote.

I appreciate that it can be taken as a metaphor - though the truth is, we say that about many things in Torah as well, like God having a strong right arm or inflamed nostrils, and whilst some of us may not understand these words literally, today, you can be pretty sure that many people still do, and originally these things were clearly taken as factual descriptions. For them, and no doubt for some people here even today, the divine judge does sit in some cloudy courtroom on high, and evaluate the evidence, and, with a giant quill, write every person's name, one by one, in the book of life, or the book of death.

Of course, it all depends what you mean by God - and what you mean by life and death as well. We are all clever at nuance and sidestepping. Yes, here we are in shul, and it is indeed the heavenly courtroom, and yes, we are standing on trial, and we carry our many misdeeds, often buried deep in memory and subconscious, and vainly try to explain and minimise them, offering a few better things that we can recall we have done, since last we were here. And yes, we might be appearing before ourselves - if a spark of God is in us, as we say, then if we are judging ourselves, then indeed in a way God is judging us. And perhaps life means living a full, healthy and hearty year, a year of quality and satisfaction and success, and death may mean a thin and frustrating and unfulfilled one from which we can still live to see another Kol Nidrei.

These are clever twists and nuances and sophistry, and I do feel more comfortable taking refuge in them, but the problem is that not everyone understands them like this. And some people think I - we - believe an external God is going to judge us -

and decide if we will live or die. And we can't be continuously writing things and saying things and then having to explain we don't really mean it or understand it like that at all!

So the Leo Baeck College cards were just printed with L'shanah Tovah - Wishing you a Happy New Year'!

Having seen that I rejected the idea of 'God deciding' whether we live or die, the congregant wrote back on a slightly different track: So, 'Is God all powerful?' Could God have stopped the holocaust and the Russian invasion of Ukraine?' Well, if God is omniscient - all knowing - as tradition believes, then God must have been aware of what would happen in the Holocaust, or in Ukraine - though I prefer Avery Cornman's version as played by George Burns in Oh God, where God says to John Denver's character - 'Of course I know what's gonna happen: just as soon as its happened!' Not even God knows the future!

We will conclude our service tonight by singing Yigdal, a powerful summary of Maimonides' 13 principals of faith, which we usually only sing this one time in the year, but even in our revised version, it still states that 'God deals kindly with those who merit kindness, and brings upon the wicked the evil consequences of their deeds.' Well, I still like the tune!

No, I assured them in my next response, 'God and humans work *'b'shutafut'* - in partnership.' It was not God who let us down - we humans failed to do our part in both those traumatic events, the Holocaust and Ukraine. And, I might add, in Rwanda, in Iran, in Pakistan. We may have had a little more success in Ireland, the US - even here in Australia, though in none of these places can we sit on our laurels - there is much work still to do, as we commit and continue to this human/divine partnership, if not of equals, at least not as servants.

So finally they asked me 'How come the prayer books don't give any hint of this, they give only praise to the Almighty?

Well, I responded, I think they do suggest it, in many places, and especially in the creative readings, but you may have to read between the lines! But why should you have to, I wonder?

Interestingly I have been particularly sensitive to this question of liturgy, having led the Editorial Committees in the production of both our Shabbat and Festival and more recently our High Holy Day prayer books. I have had many conversations with people who reject the images of God that still come to them through the pages, despite our massive efforts to degender and to introduce more equality and less hierarchical language. Often it is from young people who, at 11 or 12, may say, Rabbi, I am not sure I want a Beit Mitzvah, since I don't believe in God. Invariably it turns out that the God they don't believe in is the same one I don't believe in either! At other times it is wise elders who, with time to reflect over a lifetime, have come to conclude that, for them, this God thing is all a bit silly!

And so, since completing the current range of liturgies, I have been thinking and talking about and commencing initial work on a new service which is 'more atheist/humanistic', since it has become increasingly clear over the years that if it says Almighty, Sovereign, powerful, caring, ruling, responsive, forgiving God, then that is what people will understand - and it certainly won't resonate universally for everyone with a Jewish background! In fact, the first tentative step is in your hands - or at least it was on Rosh Hashanah, where, on the final page of the service, page 225, is a series of blessings for the new year. And the last one replaces the hierarchical melekh - king or sovereign - with Ruakh - spirit, or breath. Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, ruach haolam, oseh maasei v'reishit. Our praise to You, Eternal our God, Spirit of the universe, for the marvels of Your Creation. It is there as a pointer and taste of the future.

This project is a work in progress, and will have to go with me into the next stage of my own journey. May God grant me the years of life to continue it - by which I mean may I stay healthy, strong, enthusiastic, motivated and able to find the time, strength, resources and support to do so!

None of this is to diminish God - but to make the idea of a Spirit and order of the universe more believable, relevant and meaningful in our day to day lives. Through mitzvot, this spirit touches regularly on my existence - it's just that I don't believe that God actually dictated to Moses that I had to light the shabbat candles, keep kosher, stone to death - literally or even figuratively - my rebellious child - or even fast on Yom Kippur. I try to observe the commandments - our tradition - that I find helpful - but not because God said so thousands of years ago!

My email concluded: 'You have not said how you have reacted to this and whether it makes sense to you.' And so I open that question to all of you here. Please think about it. Do let me know your reactions or conclusions. And may our promises to give a bit more of our time, care, thought and attention to our faith and spiritual framework and health come to pass in 5783!