

“After the Hurricane...”

Part II

“Conversations Between Generations”

A Sermon for Rosh HaShanah Day 5766

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By

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Playwright William Inge suggests,

As a rule, the game of life is worth playing, but
the struggle is the prize.

Well, “after the hurricane,” many of us are phenomenal prize winners! Life has been tough for those of us on the Gulf Coast, and for those who made their home in the New Orleans area, and also for you dear ones from Baton Rouge who have served a proud and worthy role as rescuers and housers of the homeless.

B’nai Israel’s historic record will make clear that this congregation opened its heart and extended every sort of aid and support to the victims of Katrina, making this synagogue a House of Prayer for all peoples, regardless of class, race, or faith. You have done well and will continue to exercise a healing and telling presence wherever God’s children suffer.

Last night, I asked you “After the Hurricane...What are You Doing?” In the wake of this sobering, perfect storm, we asked one another:

- Are we wasting time?
- There will only be so many new years we are privileged to greet, so how shall we think of time and its opportunities?

Now, I’ll ask a new question, and, as with each succeeding sermon in this series of five, it is even more probing and personal. “After the hurricane...will you share your beliefs and your doubts with me? May we soul searchers join this first day of 5766 in a candid conversation between generations? How do you view your unique place in the 3500 years of the Jewish continuum?”

In a few months, my friend, Reverend Hill Riddle, the retired rector of New Orleans Trinity Episcopal Church, will appear in the new film *All the King’s Men* (at least if his scene isn’t cut). It shows him conducting a graveside funeral.

In a break in the filming, actor Jude Law came over to Hill and asked him this question, the depth of which Hill and I both agree was probably lost on the handsome star. Probing to the very heart of the issue of authenticity, Mr. Law innocently asked, “Hey, are you a real minister, or are you just an actor?”

No clergyperson wants to sink to the hopeless level of “actor” or hireling. And where genuine belief is concerned, don’t think that because I’m a rabbi, I have it all worked out and that I’m not sometimes assailed by doubt. If I had no doubts, my faith would be stunted at that of a child. Like you, my doubts have made me a deeper traveler into both mind and soul.

In religion, just like in your own specialty, the same holds true: “the more you know, the less you know.” Only a moron knows all the answers. Researchers now

conclude that each additional year of college reduces the odds of a person being of “certain belief” by seven percent.

I suppose it’s a wonder if there are any post-graduates here today! I have always seen us believers as pilgrims. With our search underway, we voyage toward faith upon a sea of ambiguity. We pilgrims ask things like:

- What is God’s will for me?
- How do we know what is right?
- Does God hear our prayers?
- Does God really care about what I ate for lunch? Or, does he prefer low carb?
- What part did God play in writing the Torah? What about in bringing Hurricane Katrina?
- What role does faith play in world affairs?
- Does God ever judge the wicked, or are they given a free pass?
- Is there any meaning beyond the mystery?

I’m sure there are other questions that present themselves to you on those sleepless nights. When you look at the starry sky, do you ever wonder:

- Who am I, really?
- How am I unique?
- What are my dreams?
- Where did I come from?
- And where am I going at the end?

In the latest survey of Americans’ belief in God, 80% claim to believe in a personal God (64% with no doubts, 16% with some doubts). Another 8% believe in “a higher power”; 4% believe sometimes, but not others; 4% are agnostics; and 2.5% are atheists. And then there are the Jewish responses!

Only 27% of us Jews expressed a firm belief in the existence of God, (21% believe with doubts, 22% are agnostics, but 16% of us went with “the higher power” on a good day!).

Talk with me here. Consider the story we’ve just read from our Torah. Do you really buy this idea that Abraham set off with Isaac to sacrifice his son on Mt. Moriah without a doubt in his head as to the wisdom of his mission? Wouldn’t you have wanted Abe to talk it over with Sarah and his therapist before he loaded up the donkey to go kill his son?

- And how about Moses at the Burning Bush? Did he wonder, “Did that bush really call me? I thought it did! But, it could have been the desert wind. What kind of wind calls out ‘Moses!’ and so articulately?”
- What about those plagues and the sea that conveniently divided on cue?
- How about Job in his suffering? Is anyone that trusting?
- What about Esther, with her hand on the doorknob, wondering whether to go uninvited to speak with her stupid husband the King to plead for her people’s life?

- And David spending a night sharing a king-sized bed with three lions – do you think they were vegetarians?
- How about David facing Goliath? The boy was a hunk, sure, but would three smooth stones take down a giant?
- Where did that unknown scribe find his faith to attest with such certainty, “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”?

Hey, listen, you’re free and you’re even welcome to doubt these and any other famous accounts. No one will kick you out of the Tribe. I don’t allow my personal faith to rise or fall on any one of these, because I am mindful that the story need not be factually true – and it may or may not be – in order to be true to the facts. The abiding lessons and values of Scripture remain true forever.

The papers were filled this year with the big news that 81-year-old Anthony Flew, a British philosopher and longtime champion of atheism, has changed his mind about the existence of God. No doubt, God feels incredibly relieved. It seems that, because of recent scientific discoveries, Dr. Flew has embraced a notion of God’s existence based on the apparent intelligent design of the universe. Well, I’m happy for Dr. Flew. And I wouldn’t want to live a day without my own faith. But, sometimes we need to cherish our questions, don’t we?

Here’s one for you: how can a religion (any religion) be so beautiful, and yet, so many of its adherents so hateful? Voltaire commented once:

If God created us in His own image, we have more than reciprocated.

Yes, fiercely religious people seem drawn to a cruel and unforgiving God! Last March, there was a color photo on the front page of *The New York Times* of a sheik, a Jerusalem mufti, a Christian Armenian Latin patriarch, and unbelievably, both the Ashkenazi and Sephardi chief rabbis of Israel – all gathered to pronounce their unanimity and solidarity.

I’m sure you’re wondering which of the world’s great ills had brought these diverse men of faith together. Was it world hunger or the children of Darfur? How about homelessness, third world debt, or women’s suffering (right)? Maybe it was unwanted orphans or brutal terrorism. No, it was none of these!

These “holy men” had assembled to condemn the World Pride Festival and Gay Rights Parade scheduled for last August in Jerusalem. They pronounced it “a desecration of the holy city”! These bigots could all agree on that! How shameful! How these men embarrass us, claiming to be God’s servants!

Once, a stressed woman on a busy boulevard tailgated an honest man. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, and the man did the right thing – he pulled to a stop at the crosswalk. But, the tailgating woman hit the roof – and her horn! She screamed in

frustration. But, in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked into the face of a very serious police officer. He ordered her to exit her car with her hands up. Then, he carted her off to the police station where he searched, fingerprinted, and photographed her, before placing her in a holding cell.

Two hours later, she was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer returned her personal effects. He said,

Sorry for the mistake. But, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping off the guy in front of you, and cussing a blue streak. I noticed the 'Choose Life' license plate holder, the 'What Would Jesus Do?' bumper sticker, the 'Follow Me to Sunday School' decal, and the chrome-plated Christian fish emblem on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed you had stolen the car!

Of course, the House of God – the synagogue, the church, the mosque – is filled with hypocrites. We religious folk frequently fail our God and neglect our duty to embrace and serve our brothers and sisters with love and tenderness, and instead act bitterly and play games of religious one-upmanship. Everyone's ready to speak for God!

The distance between the so-called "faithful" and the "heathen" will never be broached. Atheists will prefer to see believers as dependent and out of touch with reality. The believers will see the atheists as the victims of nihilism and amorality. In Judaism, there are some of every kind of believer and non-believer.

We make a place at our table for the one who proclaims "Adonai Elohaynu Adonai Echad," and for the one who insists, "I don't know Elohaynu and I don't know Echad," and even for the one who declares, "I deny Elohaynu and I deny Echad."

Above all, we Jews must never "jump ship." We must never surrender, nor succumb, nor submit to whatever doubt from within and forsake our unique place within the Household of Israel.

We say as Jews, L'Dor va'dor – from generation to generation! Well, here we are on this sacred day – Jewish generations together. Sociologists tell us that we American Jews are now experiencing a remarkable time of transition. Since Katrina, I'm up to here with transition! But, that's too bad for me. Here are some expert pre-Katrina hypotheses. My friend Rabbi Richard Address reads the latest polls and population studies armed with years of insight and experience. He concludes that –

- We Jews are now witnessing greater autonomy in religious expression (well, we knew that!).
- We affiliate with our synagogues for fewer years.
- We are in a decline in Jewish philanthropic participation.
- We are experiencing a loosening identity with Israel.

From all I read, picture this chart of the current generations of America's Jews in this age of transition.

- I. The first is the generation of Jews who are my age and older. We are technically referred to by some scientists as "Generation A-K" (Alta Kockers!)
- II. Next comes Generation X, the generation that followed us Baby Boomers. If you were born between 1965 and 1980, you are a Generation X American Jew who was raised on both *Sesame Street* and CD-ROM.

The term "Generation X" derives from Douglas Compland's 1991 novel about three strangers who, in an effort to glimpse their true essence, determine to distance themselves from society.

Generation X'ers have come to be described as (admittedly stereotypically) as...

...cynical, indecisive, underemployed, overeducated,
intensely private, and unpredictable.

Sounds like the synagogue board from hell, doesn't it?

- III. But, we also have to consider "Generation Y," those of you who were born between 1980 or 81 and 2002. Raise your hands! There are 60 million of you in America. Unlike Generation X, the Y's express greater confidence about the future and a greater trust in their parents and in authority figures. Generation Y'ers feel pressured to both succeed and achieve, and the need for success looms large in your life.

We know little more of Generation Y, but this is certain and crucial about Generation X. Many of their peers are alone and adrift, marrying much later than their parents did, and often, in their mid-thirties, experiencing what Robbin and Wilner, in their new book *Quarterlife Crisis*, describe as the randomness of life – its heady highs, but also its shocking doubts, loneliness, and vulnerabilities as well. Says Rabbi Address, "They may reach into their spiritual pocket and be able to pull out a religion and a theology that was good at 13, but useless at thirty-three."

So, how will all of this mix affect our Jewish future and the soul search of our several generations? Some experts predict unsettling changes and the need for a complete rethinking and redefinition of Jewish synagogue and organizational patterns. Their predictions state that:

1. Twenty-first century American Judaism will not be built on either guilt over the Holocaust or concern for Ben Geirion's model of Israel. Israel as a transcendental experiment in Jewish history is in, but Israel Bonds and the UJA are out.
2. Tevye, the Hora, and Jewish ethnic food are out, but everyone enthusiastically self-identified as "a Jew by choice" – educated about the spiritual benefits of Jewish living – is in!

Prior to Katrina, these, and other prognostications seemed at least plausible. New Orleans is under water and many of its institutions of Jewish life are either seriously damaged or utterly destroyed. The bud and flower of our Jewish young families and their precious children fled, dispersed across the nation, many of them uncertain whether or not to return to the Crescent City to rebuild lives and careers. The future of the synagogue has never been more threatened since the Spanish Code Noir or the Yellow Fever epidemics. I will earnestly pray, and I will ceaselessly cajole, and devotedly labor to convince our people to come home. And I will invite each one of them – and each one of you – to become historic partners in building the new Temple Sinai, the new Jewish Community of New Orleans, and the dream of the “New” New Orleans!

You and I have been dwarfs on the shoulders of the Jewish giants and dedicated builders of preceding generations. We are the heirs of the patriarchs, the matriarchs, the psalmists, the prophets, the sages, the philosophers, the visionaries, the exiles, and the precious martyrs who have steadfastly proclaimed themselves forever the sons and daughters of Israel through vicissitudes far more perilous than our own.

Whether you live here in Baton Rouge or in the New Orleans area or anywhere else, I think Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s admonition warrants our most serious consideration. He says:

There is all the difference in the world between
those who have everything and give nothing, and
those who have nothing, but give everything.

As we enter this New Year and, truly, this new word that have been challenged to create together, let us look to the future in the absolute delight of what you and I will be honored to bring to it.

We began our discussion admitting that we all doubt sometimes, especially when we experience special turmoil and devastating grief. But we also determinedly affirm our identity and proud belonging to a people unique on the world’s stage.

Jewish existence is a miraculous story. Our history is drama. Nothing about Jewish survival has ever been inevitable. Our continuance lies in the hands of each generation.

The future will be born of our own choosing. It will reflect the quality of our souls – our character, our accountability, our love, and our gratitude to those who have labored and planted before us. Let me close with two quotations from two very different philosophers. Historian Daniel Boorstein used to say, “Trying to shape a future without a sense of the past is like trying to slant cut flowers.”

And Yogi Berra used to say, “I’ve seen the future and it’s very much like the present, but longer.”

Let’s pray that we are ready and able to do all that must be done to embrace that “longer future.” Making our steady way toward it, may we summon to our hearts that sense of sacred destiny voiced by Jeremiah 2800 years ago in his generation’s turmoil, “God has plans for good and not for evil, to give us a future and a hope.”

And so may it be!

Amen