

“Under God”
Rosh Hashanah Morning 5772
September 29, 2011

So fall has come, schools are in session, and with classes come the rituals of the season, in their own way as fixed and formal as any religious rite. Like putting on tefillin for a traditional Jew, our students’ routine begins the same way every day: arrival, announcements, and the Pledge of Allegiance.

I’ve always wondered about the Pledge of Allegiance. Don’t get me wrong. I am an American patriot in my own way, and as a religious leader, especially a Jewish one, I am a big fan of liturgized language and routinized rituals. Communal formulas can, in fact, lodge in our subconscious, form habits and train responses and shape our outlook on the world. Cycles and repetition and patterns are precisely the elements that give meaning to our lives.

And I don’t even have a problem with talking to a piece of cloth. As I said, I’m Jewish. The symbols and metaphors of Jewish religious life can seem stranger than this. Like wearing a cloth with strings attached, or blowing air into an animal’s horn.

But the Pledge of Allegiance? Can patriotism be forced like this? Images come to mind of jingoistic mobs mindlessly chanting “USA USA” into the air as if that proves anything to anybody. I wonder what it accomplishes. It reminds me of a comment once made by Rabbi David Saperstein, head of our Reform movement’s Religious Action Center, about the effort to Hang Ten, to put up the Ten Commandments in public places, including classrooms. His reaction:

he thought that having the Ten Commandments on display as some kind of visual muzak on the wall would do about as much good for behavior in schools as having the Gideon Bible in the drawer does for morality in motel rooms.

And this reminds me, too, of something else odd about the Pledge of Allegiance. It's that phrase, right in the middle: "one nation, under God." Loyalty to our land is an admirable trait. But what's God got to do with it? Are we somehow saying that even the Creator of the Universe supports... our particular country?

It stands out even more, knowing that the two words "under God" were *added* to the Pledge of Allegiance, in the early 1950's. They weren't there originally. They were not part of the loyalty oath first composed in 1892, nor were they present when Congress adopted the Pledge as a formal expression in 1942. (By the way, the person who wrote these words... *without* a reference to the Divine... was a Christian minister and, ironically, given today's political climate... an early socialist.)

So the notion of a nation under God always bothered me. Even apart from a commitment to the separation of church and state, a feeling that this was an unnecessary mixture, an intrusion of one realm onto the other, I was always troubled by the phrase. Too many echoes of early Dylan. "But I learned to accept it, accept it with pride. For you don't count the dead, when God's on your side."

But what if the words actually mean something else? What if this was *supposed to be...* a far less self-centered view that it is taken to mean today? What if this is not about national narcissism, but actually, instead, about the limits of the law? About how even the state to which we pledge allegiance... is itself subordinate... to something else.

This is the story... of a new view... of the words “under God,” one which I think flows from Jewish history, fits in with Jewish theology... and can form an important foundation of personal spirituality.

There was once a man, and he was coming home. He had been away for a long time. He left in the midst of family strife, dishonesty, rivalry and with the threat of violence hanging over his head. He left alone, slipped off in the middle of the night. He comes back now, with the family he had built, and with a lot of luggage to get through customs.

But there, at the border, something happens. He is separated from family, interrogated through the night, wrestling with the authorities. Alone, again. He loses his passport. Faces some kind of identity theft. Asks who he is up against, to no avail. He emerges the next morning free to go, but limping. And somehow, now, he has a new name.

The ancient story has Jacob wrestling with an angel, and becoming Israel. And the explanation of the name? “*Yisrael. Ki sarita im elohi, v'im*

anashim vatuchal, Israel – for you *sarita*, you struggled, you wrestled with God and with human beings, and you have prevailed.” (Genesis 32:29)

This is a blessing? To struggle, and limp off? To toss and turn on rocky ground through sleepless nights of eternity? We may have prided ourselves, we Jews, ever since first sharing the story, on the fact that we question, that we grapple, that we wrestle with ultimate questions to make meaning and make sense of the world. But for God’s sake, that’s a ridiculous blessing!

Turns out that maybe, actually, this *is* a ridiculous blessing. Because... that’s not what the word was supposed to mean. According to Bible Scholar Yisrael Knohl, one of my teachers this past summer, the word *sarita*, as “and you struggled,” appears in only one other place with this meaning – and that second citation is a reference back to this one!

In fact, a name formulated as X plus the divine ending “El” *always* means, instead: God will do X, whatever X may be, not *you* have done something to or with God. God is almost always the subject. Raphael: God will heal; Gavriel: God will prevail; Nathaniel; God will give; or the very common English name Yerachmiel; God will be merciful.

And what is the much more common meaning of the root *sar*? You know it, from the name Sarah, which means princess. Or the modern Hebrew term *sar*, which means “minister” in the cabinet. *Yisrael* must mean... it must have

originally meant... “God will rule.” In our origin, then, in our very name... we Jews are... a nation, under God.

Now, this may bother the agnostics and atheists among us. But think, for a moment, in historical terms. What is this saying, and what does it imply? We know, from the very earliest era of Israelite history, that we were different from the others, not (only) in the idea of one God, but politically. For the first two centuries of our political life, alone among the peoples of the Ancient Near East we *did not have a king!* The very earliest archeological excavations of Israelite settlements, indeed, reveal a remarkably – almost uniquely egalitarian society. No royalty, no concentration of wealth. We were a nation of equals: equal before God, and *not* subject to a mortal monarch.

This isn't about God being on our side. It's about our being on God's side. It is about the imperfection of institutions, the fallibility of the flesh. It was a revolutionary idea, a total liberation from the prevailing political structures around us. I would suggest, indeed, that it is a revolutionary idea still.

Even with the eventual emergence of a monarchy of our own, this is a tradition which produces the notion that every human being, male and female, king and commoner, rich and poor, tall and short and thin and... less thin... and gay and straight and white and black and yellow and brown, every one of us, is made in the image of God, of infinite worth, inherently equal.

This is a tradition which puts forth the radical and terribly misunderstood idea of *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye, interpreted for outsiders as harsh, until you realize that in surrounding societies it was not an eye for an eye, but death for the eye of a superior, and a fine for the eye of an inferior, and you realize that this whole passage was not meant to be about the literal putting out of eye or chopping off of hands, but about figuring out equivalent monetary value, and, fundamentally, what this is actually all about is *equality under the law*. Because we must all be treated with the same level of respect, in a world in which we live, under God.

If human beings are all there is, if there is no sense of something beyond us then ultimately we are the arbitrary authors of our own morality. But I need a world in which the Nazis were wrong – not just wrong because they lost, not just wrong because they were beaten and overthrown, but absolutely, ultimately, morally wrong. For me, personally – I know others do not need this but for me the assumption that we all stand shoulder to shoulder and in the same place, over and against something beyond us... it is my own sense of God as the ground of morality and the guarantor of human dignity.

But to live “under God,” how do we know? And what God are we talking about?

The very notion can drive men mad, plunge the world into war and set continents aflame. The story we read this morning sees a God-intoxicated

patriarch nearly sacrifice his own son. The act repels us, but the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard called Abraham the “supreme knight of faith,” precisely for subordinating his entire ethical vision to what he thought was the voice of God. And Abraham was hardly alone. From faith-driven fanatics who pilot planes into people, to any extremist willing to kill in the name of God, we all know that a sense of higher purpose can lead to the worst of outcomes. Under God? These people needed to be on the couch instead.

In his latest book, Rabbi David Hartman writes about a “God Who Hates Lies.” He shares the struggle of someone from the yeshiva world confronting conflicts between what the tradition teaches, and what we know to be right and good and true. Should we still say mournful prayers on Tisha B’Av for conquered and downtrodden Jerusalem, when we look around at a very different reality? How can we be commanded to weep in present tense over the desolation of a city when standing in the same spot as it grows and thrives and bustles with life? What happens when dusty dictates are in obvious dissonance with the evidence of our eyes? Hartman tackles questions regarding the treatment of Jews-by-choice, the role of women, and attitudes towards the “other,” meaning how Judaism views non-Jews. He claims that we have a measure of control about what vision of God we choose to let lead us, and that there is a role for the individual moral sensitivity in evaluating our obligations. This is a simply astonishing conclusion for someone who emerges out of the Orthodox world.

But with caution and caveats and moral correctives intact, still I believe that one of the core concepts of Judaism, one of its most essential teachings is this: You are important. You are valuable. You are, indeed, of infinite worth. But it's not all about you. Put another way, with AA, and as I said here just last year: "There is a God. You're not it."

I want to ask you something. Have you ever felt pulled to do something... that wasn't about you? Ever you ever felt the tug of something, you just *had* to do? What did you do? How did you respond? Who is calling? Is anyone home? Where does that voice come from? Are we really sure that it is all inside?

And is it possible that the purpose of freedom is not to do whatever we want? That what freedom is for, in a meaningful life, is to be able to do what we have to do? Not boundlessness, escaping all constraint, but connection and commitment and commandment. Duty and responsibility and obligation. The words that come at the end of the musical Pippin: "if I'm not tied to anything, I'll never be free." Ask not what God can do for you...

To live under God is to live with a sense of service, an outward projection, that we perceive in others not only what we would want, but we go further, dig deeper, work hard to figure out... what they would want. Indeed, the standard of *tzedakah*, of righteous giving, in Jewish law, at least in the ideal, is that we are supposed to provide for those in need support up to the

level at which they were previously accustomed to living. Impossible in practice, perhaps, but that is the ideal.

To live under God is to try to be a *mensch*, a good person, at all times, to remember that how we act is a reflection not only on us, as individuals, but that God's rep, as it were, is in our hands as well. Any Jew who has ever cringed on hearing about the arrest of a perfect stranger with a characteristic Jewish name knows this intuitively. The concept of *Kiddush HaShem*, the sanctification of God's name, reminds us that we are responsible not only for what we actually do, but, unfairly, and much more challenging, we are responsible for how we are perceived, as well.

To live under God is to know... that everything is subject to a higher authority, that we must question our own community, societal convention, inherited conviction... even our own country if we sense... that it is on the wrong track.

This day, this remembrance of creation, this birthday of the world, I pledge allegiance anew to that which I am called to uphold: the goodness of my country, the welfare of my people, the vision and values of my God.

To what, to whom, are you loyal? What are your highest ideals, and deepest beliefs? What brings you, and what binds you? And this Rosh Hashanah, what is your pledge?

L'shanah Tovah.