

In Our Hands
Yom Kippur Morning 5774
September 14, 2013

D'var Torah

The major Torah reading for the morning of Yom Kippur, in Conservative and Orthodox congregations, comes from the book of Leviticus, Chapter 16, which details the priestly role in the rituals of the Day of Atonement, allowing them to effectuate atonement for themselves, their tribe, and then the entire community. Some of the language used for this process we retain in our ritual, towards the beginning of the Mincha service this afternoon.

Our Reform movement has chosen, instead, to read a different passage this morning. It comes from near the end of the book of Deuteronomy, and involves a renewal of the covenant, an assertion that the Torah is attainable and the life demanded here achievable, and an exhortation to choose life and blessing and the way of God over... other alternatives.

Often, in introducing this portion, we focus on the very beginning verses, the inclusive tone, the role that we play as witnesses to the covenant, the fact that the essence of Jewish commitment involved not only our ancestors but also every subsequent generation of Jews, all the way down to us and our children and their children and their children after them. But in doing this, in focusing on the beginning, we risk overlooking something later in this reading, a verse which is, in fact, one of the most important lines in all of Jewish history.

The verse seems simple and straightforward. It is the claim “*lo vashamayim hi,*” that the Torah is “not in the heavens,” so that it is inaccessible and esoteric, beyond our understanding or ability to fulfill. But, as I mentioned in my sermon on the Second Day of Rosh Hashanah, these words are the climax of an argument amongst the rabbis in what is probably the most famous story in the Talmud, the tale called *Tanur Shel Achnai*, the oven of Achnai.

There, in a debate about whether a certain type of oven was kosher or not, Rabbi Eliezer made an assertion – and all the other rabbis present, all of his contemporary peers disagreed with him. He tried to weigh in with, let us say, non-conventional debating tactics. He made a tree uproot and relocate, a stream flow backwards and, in an indication that arguments which are too intense really can destroy a house... he made the wall lean inward. Finally,

frustrated, after the support of the natural world – by which I think the Talmud means objective facts – was not enough, he asked for help from heaven, and even God weighed in on Eliezer’s side. “Why do you argue with Rabbi Eliezer?” God asks. “His rulings are always right!”

And then comes the stunning response from Rabbi Yehoshua, who, in an act of astonishing chutzpah, stands up to God and quotes the Torah back to God, using it against God! Yehoshua says: “*Lo Vashamayim Hi!* It is not in the heavens,” as if to say “Listen, God! You had your chance to speak at Sinai. You gave us the Torah there. But now it is our turn, and we do not listen to any new heavenly voices since then!”

Historians argue over whether this was a subtle rebuke to a wonder-working, miracle producing stray Jewish leader who was claiming to be a new voice from heaven at the time, if not an actual relative of the Eternal. Whether or not this story is a response to a nascent Christianity, it is still astonishing.

God speaks, so we say: Okay, so now it’s 5-2! This assertion that Jewish life is in our hands, to shape and mold the way we see fit, to interpret for ourselves... this is one of the most humanly liberating, most anthropocentric claims ever made by any religious tradition. In a way, what we say with this story is this: we may once have heard the voice of God clearly. Maybe. But that was long ago. In fact, religious life is not about a mandate from on high, but, instead, it is about *our response*, and our vision. We *sense* something beyond this world... but we do not know. We intuit, and then we interpret. In essence, we are the authors of Judaism, the builders of this house, the shapers of own spiritual lives.

And in the Talmud, it tells us – or so the rabbis claim – that God laughed, and said “My children have defeated Me!”

It’s up to us. It’s up to you!