

Living with Chaos

There is a story about a man named Rav Shmuel. Rav Shmuel trusted God and accepted whatever happened to him and his family most of the time. One year, he got really frustrated by much of what he saw in the world. A young woman in his town lost her only child. A wealthy family suddenly lost everything and became poor. A single woman, who was the sole caregiver of her mother and son, came down with a horrible illness and a young father died in an accident.

Rav Shmuel began to question God's ways and the ways of the world. He cried out, "*Ribono Shel Olam* – God of the Universe, tell me your ways. Explain to me how this world works. Please send me Elijah, your prophet, to show me the world's mysteries."

The next night, as he was walking the fields, Elijah appeared to him.

"Elijah, please let me go with you so that you can explain God's ways. Show me the meaning behind the misery in this world so I don't lose sight of the joys and the blessings as well."

Elijah turned to him and said, "I will let you go with me, but under one condition – you may ask no questions!"

"Agreed," said Reb Shmuel.

First, they came to a small hut of a poor but very kind couple that offered to share their meager meal and give them a place to sleep for the night. In the morning, the couple's only cow dropped dead. The next day, they visited the grand mansion of a miserly owner. An uprooted tree covered its entrance. The miser refused to let them into his house and had his servants show them to the stable instead. Next morning as they were leaving, Elijah caused the tree to magically return to its upright position. The next day, they visited two synagogues. One house of worship was filled with disgruntled and inhospitable people.

As they were leaving, Elijah told them, "May you be blessed with many leaders." The second congregation was filled with simple but kind souls and Elijah said to them, "May you be blessed with only one leader."

Each step of the way, Reb Shmuel got more confused, yet he kept silent. Finally, he could contain himself no longer. He turned to Elijah and said, "Please, I know you told me not to ask questions but I must ask you to explain. Explain God's ways in the world. It just doesn't make any sense."

"Well, Elijah. Do you remember that couple that had only one cow? That night the Angel of Death was due to take the woman, but I persuaded God to take the cow's life instead. And do you remember the tree in front of the mansion? Under that tree was hidden a treasure chest filled with gold. I returned the tree's roots to the soil so the miserly man would never find the treasure. And do you remember the synagogue to which I gave the blessing of many leaders? Actually, that was a curse, because when there are many leaders, nothing ever gets done. And finally, the small synagogue where I

blessed them with one fine leader, that – Reb Shmuel – is a blessing, because it's better to have one wise person rule than a group of fools.”

Before Elijah departed, he said to Reb Shmuel, “My friend, I want to give you some advice. Whenever you're confused about God's ways, doubt no longer. One can't always understand the ways of God. You must believe there is a reason.”

Elijah departed with the wind and Reb Shmuel returned home.

As I tell this story, I am conflicted. On the one hand, it is comforting. There's a purpose to everything. Even amidst tragedy, there is meaning; amidst chaos there is order, amidst confusion there is clarity. Yet, on the other hand, it's infuriating. It's too neat, too simple. It's just one more charming parable used to explain away the chaos in the world.

This year, it isn't working for me. On Yom Kippur, when we weigh our actions, I'd like to push us further and ask: how do we find hope, strength, and guidance from our Jewish tradition to move forward in a chaotic, random and often times very confusing world? How do we do this without simple pithy stories? And how do we not lose hope and just throw up our hands and say, there is no God?

The body count increases every day from Iraq to Darfur. The world outside our lives is filled with pain over the suffering of people we don't know. This year, it hit me in the gut. A friend of mine told me that her three-year-old daughter had been sexually abused. The abuse lasted for a year before it was discovered. Rabbi Carol Meyers, a kind, gentle person, a friend, a teacher, a storyteller, and a mother of two children (one of them autistic) died within ten weeks of her cancer diagnosis. She was 50. Another colleague of mine, who is a hospital chaplain, is himself battling an inoperable brain tumor. A father in our community died at the young age of 47 leaving a wife and two children. A three-year-old girl is struggling with lymphoma. Perhaps Woody Allen was right when he said, “I believe in God, it's just that He's an underachiever.”

This year, however, has also been filled with joy. Ezri, my baby, my third child, was born in November and I turned 40, a milestone birthday. My work at Temple Israel continues to deepen. I celebrated Shabbat with over 80 women on the beach at the women's retreat. I officiated at the wedding of a man with whom I worked for conversion. He married a woman who grew up at Temple Israel. Oscar Wilde put it well when he said “A deep truth is something in which its opposite is also a deep truth.” It's as if the world's chaos and beauty live hand in hand.

When I felt called to be a rabbi, I placed God in my life. I didn't grow up with an awareness of God in the world. God wasn't spoken about at home. But by pursuing my life's mission, I embraced the presence of God in my life. And I expected more. But that's not what religion is about. It's not about easy answers.

In fact, finding meaning in this sometimes very senseless world is an old struggle. It's not even a post-Holocaust question. It began with the very first death in the Bible when Cain killed his brother Abel. It continued in the Talmud when the rabbis told the story of Elisha ben Abuyah. The story is based on a commandment in Deuteronomy (22:6-7.) where we are told that we'll have a long life if we remember to shoo a mother bird away from her nest before taking her young.

One day, Elisha was sitting studying in the valley of Gennesaret when he saw a man climb to the top of a tree where there was a bird's nest containing a mother and her

chicks. The man took both the mother and her chicks, defying the commandment, and climbed down to safety. The next day, he saw a young boy climb to the top of a tree, shoo away the mother and take only the chicks, observing the law to the letter. But then, when the boy reached the ground, a snake bit him and he died. Legend has it that this event shook Elisha's life. His faith was rocked, and he stopped believing in God. He became an apostate and to this day he is referred to as the *Acher*, meaning "other".

My heart should go out to Elisha, the apostate, because I understand his despair. But he knows better. On Yom Kippur, didn't he repeat the very words we'll say this morning: *Me yecheveh oo' mee yamoot* – who shall live and who shall die, whose death is timely and whose is not? I'm sure he shuddered as we do today because he knew that these words are true – truer than the promise in Deuteronomy that we'll be punished for our bad actions and rewarded for our good ones.

To the Elisha ben Abuyah story about the bird and the eggs, I offer something else. The Alter Rebbe of Kelm taught that the world could be compared to a pearl necklace with a clasp. With the clasp, the necklace has form. Without the clasp, the pearls scatter to the floor and roll in every direction. What is the clasp? What is the string? Who are the pearls?

Here is what I think the Alter Rebbe was talking about. The pearl necklace can be compared to my dinner table. On the one hand I beg, cajole and threaten my children to stay at the darn table, use their forks, and for once try to speak with soft voices so Bruce and I can maybe, please God, have a halfway pleasant meal. Our dinner table is the string; the kids, Bruce and I are the pearls; and the clasp – well, that's the unexplainable magic that happens between us around the table. It is either in place and we have a great time as one girl sings the latest song from High School Musical 2, another tells us about all the words that start with the letter "a", and baby Ezri just stares up adoringly at his sisters. Or the clasp breaks and the family dynamic erupts. It's a magical balance between control and freedom. It is a line every parent walks and one each of us tries to balance as religious Jews.

Elisha ben Abuyah wasn't willing to walk this fine line. He used the injustices of life as an excuse to opt out of Judaism and religion all together – and that's apostasy...to declare that life is chaos and that with that chaos there is no reason or obligation to establish personal or communal order.

So how do I find meaning in this world of chaos? Where do I look for guidance? First, I believe that chaos is innocent. Chaos isn't guilty; it's neutral. It is the result of a world put in motion by God. God created the world. The sun comes up each day and the rain falls in the winter. We are born, some of us live long lives, others of us suffer early deaths. And yet like Heschel, I feel the awe of God when looking up at a star-studded night in Malibu or when seeing the sparkle in my daughter's eyes as she proudly does math in her head.

On the one hand I agree with Maimonides that God is, was, and will forever be in, above and beyond everything. Yet I can't believe that God orchestrated the death of my cousin at the age of 10 in a water accident or the long life of my grandmother who lived until she was almost 93. I know in my gut that Buber is right when he says that God is found in relationship because I feel holiness when I look into my father's eyes as he watches me with pride when I lead High Holiday services. Yet I don't believe that the chaos of my difficult childhood with an obsessive-compulsive brother or the luck of my relatively healthy body is a punishment or a reward for my actions.

So how do I find meaning? I keep asking the questions, learning from other Jewish thinkers, and adding my voice to the discussion.

Second, to return to the metaphor of the pearl necklace but in a different way. For me, study, the practice of *mitzvot*, prayer and celebrating with community are the clasp that holds my life together and helps me make sense of the world. The pearls are the days of the year and I am the string running through them. When I feel sickened over my friend's molested daughter, I turn to Job who cried out to God over the injustices of his life. When I'm over-worked and frazzled from the week's events, I love Shabbat because I don't turn on the TV, my computer, run errands or open the mail. When I feel like acting out and going crazy, I put on my afro wig and drink a little wine on Purim.

There are other times as well: like when I named my daughter Sivan on the eighth day of her life, even though a suicide bomber had just blow himself up in Jerusalem. Or when I asked a woman who had been beaten as a child to teach on the *Akedah* or asked a grown man who had accidentally killed his brother when he was a child, to help lead the *kaddish* for his grandmother. In all these cases, I don't try to tame the chaos around me. That would be futile, counterproductive and ultimately damaging. Instead, I turn to our rich Jewish tradition and exist independent of, in spite of, and perhaps even in protest to the chaos of the world.

Third, I live my life by constantly assessing if I am using myself fully in the world; using all the gifts I have been granted in the best possible way. In Hebrew, it's called a *cheshbon hanefesh*, an accounting of one's soul. It's about constantly trying to think deeper, care more, and act more kindly almost as a demonstration against life's uncertainty. By doing this, we stare chaos in the face and say, "You may be strong, but you won't blow us over."

Fourth, I think a little rebellion and angry protest is a good thing in response to our chaotic world. My favorite example of this is Moses. You may remember that Moses didn't grow up as a slave. He was raised in the Pharaoh's palace and escaped after murdering an Egyptian. He married a Moabite woman and raised his children away from all the poverty and hardship of the Jews in Egypt. But then, one day, God approached Moses, and he learned about the Jewish people and their enslavement. And what did he do? He turned to God and said, "Why did you bring evil upon these people?" (Ex 5:22) What chutzpah, accusing God of evil! How could he say that God, the author of morality and justice, did evil? But he did, and I think we can. Proof is that once he risked chastising God, the very next event was the burning bush – one of the most intimate moments in the Bible when God reveals the mystical qualities of the Universe to Moses.

It's a very Jewish idea to argue with God and receive a reward as if the challenge itself unfolds new dimensions. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his book "*Halachic Man*," offers a beautiful definition of what it means to be a religious Jew. (I thank Rabbi David Wolpe for showing me this quote.) Soloveitchik says, "Religion is not at the outset a refuge of grace and mercy for the despondent and desperate, it is not an enchanted stream for crushed spirits, but a raging, clamorous torrent of man's consciousness, with all its cries, pains and torments." In other words, faith is something that should force us to question, to wonder, to challenge and to explore.

Religion, and in our case Jewish practice, is an antidote to chaos. We can't control it, but we can rise above it. We need to be like Reb Shmuel. If being Jewish is too comfortable, then it is not faith – it's blind trust. However, if it is worrisome or if it's challenging, then there's a chance that it is real faith.

The Kotzker Rebbe, tells a story about a man who came to him and said, “ I doubt the existence of God.”

And the Kotzker Rebbe said, “So what?”

Then the man said, “But if I doubt God, then maybe God didn’t create the world.”

And the Kotzker Rebbe said, “So what?”

And then the man said, “If God didn’t create the world, then maybe there’s no basis for morality.”

“So what?” was the reply.

And then the man said, “Well, if there’s no basis for morality then I don’t know what to do and I can’t sleep at night and I’m tormented.”

“Ahhh,” said the Kotzker Rebbe. “If you’re tormented, then I’m not at all worried about your faith.”

Let’s face it, that’s why we’re here. That’s why we come to *shul* for an entire day to meditate, to think, and to reflect on our life. It is because deep down we’re tormented and at the same time we’re grateful for all of life’s gifts. That’s why Jewish tradition forces us to reconnect with our soul at least once a year – because the death of searching is the death of us.

What will we find when we continue to search?

Maybe we won’t find THE answer. Maybe there won’t be a life-shattering voice from above that comes down and says, “Michelle, the meaning in life can be found...(silence).” Because any answer would ultimately be too simplistic.

Part of living with a mature faith is living with polarity. That’s why the tale of Elijah and Reb Shmuel doesn’t work for me. Its answer is too easy, too neatly tied up in a box. It’s not who we Jews are, because it’s not the answer that matters, it’s how we respond, how we hold on to that pearl necklace and re-string our lives: one bead for lighting the Shabbat candles and one for feeding the hungry on Christmas day; one for visiting a sick person at Cedars; one for studying Torah; one for opening our heart to the soul of a recently divorced woman and one for dwelling in the sukkah on Wednesday night; one for dancing with the Torah a week later and one for learning how to read Hebrew. One by one, the necklace will lengthen. Then we will reach for the clasp and somehow, without us knowing how – with the help of our community, our tradition, the practice of the *mitzvot*, and the mysterious presence of God – somehow the necklace will stay together.

Our task on Yom Kippur is not to come up with the answers, but to continue to ask the questions, to struggle and to persevere, to remind us that living a Jewish life means living with meaning and purpose alongside the chaos. I look forward to many more years of chaos and questioning with you.