

Chapter One

Faith

“But the righteous shall live by his faith”

Habakuk 2:4

My faith journey has taken me many different places, physically, emotionally, and spiritually. I studied Buddhism, martial arts, and meditated; I studied psychology, philosophy, and comparative religion. Eventually my search for faith brought me to back to the religion of my youth, Judaism, to rabbinical school and to Israel.

People who have a deep faith in God seem different than other people. They are more at peace, better equipped to deal with the ups and downs that life throws their way. Having faith in God can totally transform your life. But is there a way to cultivate faith in God if you don't already have it? You can. But it's not easy.

Searching for God

This sermon was given on the first day of Rosh Hashanah 5765 – it was the first High Holiday sermon I gave at Congregation B'nai Israel in Toledo. It is a meditation on the search for God.

Is the richest person you know the happiest person you know?

Is the poorest person the unhappiest?

If your circle of acquaintances is anything like mine, the connection between wealth and happiness is tenuous at best.

The Dalai Lama writes “There are two ways to create happiness. The first is external. By obtaining better shelter, better clothes, and better friends we

can find a certain measure of happiness and satisfaction. The second is through mental development, which yields inner happiness. However, these two approaches are not equally viable. External happiness cannot last long without its counterpart. If something is lacking in your perspective—if something is missing in your heart—then despite the most luxurious surroundings, you cannot be happy. However, if you have peace of mind, you can find happiness even under the most difficult circumstances.”

The Dalai Lama writes from the perspective of Tibetan Buddhism. But the Jewish tradition teaches the exact same thing. In Pirkei Avot it says “*aizēhu ashir? Hasameach b’chelko*,” “Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot.”

Most people focus on the external path to happiness. We’ve been conditioned by the media to equate possessions with joy. We’ve allowed our self-worth to become defined by our job titles, our incomes, the size of our S.U.V.s and the demographics of our neighborhoods.

But if money buys happiness, then why are the richest nations on earth the biggest consumers of Prozac?

And if money buys happiness, why do so many so-called “successful” people feel that something in their lives is missing?

When people decide to look in the internal direction for happiness, sometimes they have no idea where to start—even when the answer is right at hand.

The story is told of a humble shoe maker named Chaim Mendel who lived in the little village of Shnipsishtick. One night Chaim dreamt of a great treasure under a bridge in Warsaw. The next night he had the same dream. And again a third night. The dream was so realistic, Chaim couldn’t shake it. He resolved to go to Warsaw and look under the bridge for the treasure. His wife and neighbors thought he was crazy, but he wasn’t going to be deterred. He packed up a few meager provisions and headed out for Warsaw.

After a few weeks of walking, he finally reached Warsaw. He wasn't quite sure what to do, because if he made a show of obviously looking, he would be sure to attract notice. So he tried to blend in, he walked over the bridge a few times, looking discretely for signs. An officer noticed him and came over and asked, "Just what is it you are looking for?" Chaim decided he would never find the treasure this way, and it would be best to tell the officer the story, and hope he would help him find the treasure and share it with him. So Chaim told him the story. When he finished, the officer said, "foolish peasant, wasting all that time and money to come to Warsaw looking for treasure because of a silly dream. Why, I've had the same dream three nights in a row myself...that in the town of Shnipishtick there's a man named Chaim Mendel, and under his stove there's a treasure. Do you know how far Shnipishtick is? Do you know how many people named Chaim Mendel must live there? Do you think I would waste my time on such a fruitless journey? Go home, little man, and quit wasting your time."

When Chaim got home, he looked under his stove, and sure enough found a great treasure, sufficient for him and his family to live very comfortably.

A lot of Jews, me included, are like Chaim in the story. We've gone looking for treasure somewhere far away from home.

Jews are disproportionately represented in American Buddhist circles. They're called "Jew-Bu's" – and I used to be one of them. When I was 18 years old and in the Army, I got interested in spiritual things. Despite (or maybe because of) having had a Bar Mitzvah and several years of Hebrew school, it never occurred to me to look at Judaism to fulfill my spiritual needs. I turned to Buddhism: I read every book I could find, I started meditating 15-20 minutes a day. But for me, Buddhism was not the answer. There may be a lot of wisdom there, but my soul, my neshamah, is not a Buddhist neshamah. It's a Jewish neshamah, and I eventually figured out that my path to inner happiness

had to be the Jewish path, not the Buddhist path. Years later I started looking, and eventually found MY treasure right at home.

Why is it that so many Jews go looking for spirituality in the East, or in New Age fads, instead of turning to the Jewish wisdom that is their birthright?

It's not because what they are looking for is missing in Judaism. They just don't know it's there. For too many Jews, their Jewish education stopped at the age of 13, and for too many who continued after 13 the curriculum in Hebrew High or confirmation classes failed to fire up their souls with a love of Torah.

What picture of Judaism does a child have? Many kids – and some adults! – get the idea of God as an old man with a long beard who sits on a throne in heaven. The Bible is full of stories that a rational, scientific, intellectual adult could not possibly believe. Some people find they can't believe the world was created in six days, or that God destroyed the world in a flood, so they reject Judaism. If they can't believe in Adam and Eve in a literal sense, they can't believe in keeping kosher either.

It was a great revelation to me when I figured out that you can believe in the Big Bang theory and evolution AND be a seriously committed and religious Jew. I used to have this sort of secular superiority complex, thinking that if you wanted to be religious, it meant you had to take your rational, scientific brain out and put it on a shelf. NOT TRUE!

We're not required to take the Torah literally. In fact, we're not ALLOWED to take it literally! The great rabbi Maimonides (Rambam) said that if you take the Torah literally you're distorting it and doing it a great disservice. You should not, God forbid, think that because the Torah says that God took us out of Egypt "with a strong arm" it means that God has a real, physical arm. We're supposed to understand that the Torah speaks in the language of people and it uses myth and metaphor to teach us.

Many of the stories in the Bible are completely in line with science if you read them on a metaphorical level. Take the story of Adam and Eve. The Torah says God created Adam, “male and female He created them.” Science, via evolution, can explain the mechanism through which God created Adam and Eve. Science, in fact, confirms that we all have a common paternal ancestor, which they have nicknamed “Adam” and a common maternal ancestor they have named “Eve.” The scientists also say that Adam and Eve lived 80,000 years apart. Maybe the Torah makes more sense! The important lesson which comes from Torah, and is backed up by science, is that everyone on the planet is family: we are all related to each other, and that implies we should treat each other with respect and consideration. Ultimately we all have the same “*yichus*,” the same ancestry.

The stories like Adam and Eve, or Noah’s Ark, are myths. A myth is not necessarily false, nor is it necessarily true. According to Rabbi Neil Gilman “A myth should be understood as a structure through which a community organizes and makes sense of its experience.” A myth is the way that we explain the world. In the scientific realm, the “myth” of evolution does a good job of explaining how people came to be. In the spiritual realm, the myth of Adam and Eve does a good job of explaining what it means to be *Adam*, to be human.

Science has only recently discovered the idea of a common ancestor; Judaism has had this concept for thousands of years, and has developed a rich spiritual and ethical literature based on the fact that we are all family.

When we read the Torah metaphorically, we can also find a very different picture of God than if we read it literally. One of the things that helped me find my way back to Judaism as a spiritual path was finding a conception of God in Judaism that worked for me. It’s a concept of God the observant Jew affirms twice a day in the Shema: *Adonai Echad*, God is One. The profound unity and interconnectedness of everything in the universe is an idea that I

thought was strictly a Buddhist concept—until I learned that Kabbalah says the exact same thing, and science agrees. There is a deep unifying structure to the universe that science is only beginning to understand—which Judaism has been talking about for millennia.

Finding a view of God that made sense to me, and learning that to be a serious Jew does not mean running away from science, opened a huge door for me. A couple of books I read served as the officer in the story for me—they showed me that the treasure I was looking for—a spiritual path that would answer my soul’s instinctive search for meaning and happiness—was right back at “home,” within the Jewish tradition.

Following Judaism as a spiritual path is more than just reading and learning—it’s very much about doing. But more than just “doing”—it’s about doing with understanding.

Logic suggests that understanding leads to doing; that insight leads to commitment. That’s why I’m giving this sermon. I hope that increased *understanding* of Judaism you get from it will inspire you to actually *do* something different.

The Talmud itself agrees that insight leads to action. In the Talmud, masechet Kiddushin it says: R. Tarfon and the Elders were sitting around when someone asked, “Which is greater, study, or deeds?” R. Tarfon answered, “Deeds are greater.” R. Akiva responded “Study is greater, for it leads to deeds.” Then they all answered and said: “Study is greater, for it leads to action.”

However, we also have an example in the Torah itself of the process working the other way around. Of commitment leading to insight. Of doing leading to understanding. After Moses came down from the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the people responded (Exodus 24:7) “*na’aseh v’nishmah*,” we will obey, and we will understand. The Besht, the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Chasidut, interpreted this as meaning that it is through action,

through doing, that we are led to understanding. The Besht takes the teaching from the Talmud and turns it on its head!

For me, after I had that flash of insight, that “Judaism could make sense,” I was willing to take on some commitment. It led to my wife Lauri and I being willing to take on some of the mitzvot. To take what Abraham Joshua Heschel called a “leap of action.” We were willing to say, “OK, maybe we don’t completely “get” the idea of Shabbat, but let’s try it and see what happens.”

And what we discovered when we tried Shabbat in a serious way completely transformed our lives. Shabbat is one of the fundamental pieces of the Jewish spiritual path.

I hate to admit it, since as a rabbi I want to encourage all of you to come to shul on Saturday morning, but attending synagogue is NOT the most important part of Shabbat.

Shabbat is really a statement about your priorities, and it’s about making time for the things we say are important.

Any kind of spiritual work—any kind of seeking inner happiness—takes time. There is no way around it. There are no short cuts. You can sit and meditate, you can spend time in prayer, you can read books, you can study sacred texts, or you can go listen to your guru, but finding inner happiness takes some time. Most of us are so busy during the week chasing *external* happiness that we don’t have time to pursue *inner* happiness—real happiness! Shabbat is about setting aside 25 hours a week to spend time with friends and family, at a leisurely pace with no attention paid to the clock. 25 hours a week to read or talk about spiritual matters, to eat good meals and drink good wine. To really experience life that is rushing by so quickly. To find peace in *being*, rather than pursuing happiness by *doing*. My wife Lauri calls Shabbat a 25-hour spa for the soul. I couldn’t think of a better description!

Some people are afraid that if they try really observing Shabbat it will be hard on their families—the kids won’t be able to participate in soccer or

drive to birthday parties. But if you replace soccer or birthday parties with serious quality time with Mom and Dad—time which can be spent walking, bike riding, playing cards, and sharing leisurely meals—the gain is far more than the loss. Our kids love putting on plays and musicals of their own invention for us on Shabbat afternoon. Go ask one of my kids what’s her favorite day of the week. She’ll tell you it’s Shabbat.

And you can become an activist – if soccer games are on Saturdays, try to get them switched to Sundays; start a Jewish league if you need to. If your kids are invited to Shabbat birthday parties, send them to a Jewish Day School where parents honor the Sabbath – or should – by not discriminating against children who don’t drive on Shabbat. Our own children love theatre – but all the major children’s theatre programs in Toledo are on Saturday mornings. So my wife has helped to start one with a Jewish orientation – on Sunday afternoons here at B’nai Israel. Next on the list are the Toledo Art Museum’s Saturday-only children’s classes.

You may think, it’s easy for you to say – you’re a rabbi! OF course YOU can come to shul on Shabbat – it’s your job!

But I came to the rabbinate after 20 years in the business world. And when I first became observant I was the Vice President of a semiconductor firm with over \$100 million a year in sales. I admit it was tough for me the first time I told my boss I couldn’t get to an offsite meeting held on Saturday until over an hour after the sun went down. But you know what? I did it, and the CEO was sympathetic, and it was not a problem.

Too often in our Jewish history – especially in the last century – we’ve worked *too* hard to fit in, to assimilate, not to make a fuss about our holidays or our laws. It’s gotten to be where observant Jews like Senator Joe Lieberman are seen as “exotic” – outside the Jewish mainstream.

The truth is it’s never been easier to be an observant Jew. Even here in Toledo we have several stores that carry kosher meat. We live in a multi-

cultural society that accepts diversity. Anyone who really does not want to work on Saturday can usually find a way to do it, often by working the days the Christians would like to have off. We don't have to hide anymore. In fact, we shouldn't! Each one of us can strike a blow for Jewish liberation, to make ourselves, our neighbors and our children and grandchildren free to live openly – and observantly – as Jews.

I mentioned how both the Dalai Lama and Pirkei Avot say that happiness comes from having an attitude of being content with your lot. One of the ways we cultivate this attitude in Judaism is through daily prayer. Now you may be thinking that if daily prayer is anything like what I'm experiencing today—hours of Hebrew that I don't understand—what's the point? I don't blame you. But that's NOT what daily prayer is about. You can say all of your prayers in English if you want to—God understands all languages. And while it's nice to use a prayer book, you are also totally free to improvise.

For me, prayer is about two things: connecting with God, and cultivating a certain attitude toward the world. Having a relationship with God is like having a relationship with a person: you're going to be on much more intimate terms with someone you talk to three times a day than someone you talk to three times a year. Prayer can include simply talking to God, pouring out your heart to God like you would to a good friend. If you make it part of your daily routine, prayer can help you feel God as a presence in your life and not just as a theoretical concept.

Prayer encourages us to cultivate an attitude of gratitude—of being happy with our lot. Our tradition teaches us to start our day, first thing, before we even get out of bed, with a short prayer thanking God for restoring OUR souls to US. If you start your day with a reminder that it's good to be alive—and especially if you are in good health—it helps to take the disappointments life throws your way in stride.

All of the different aspects of Judaism—whether ritual commandments like the Sabbath and prayer, or ethical commandments like giving charity or not gossiping—are part of a path to inner happiness. My experience has led me to understand that within Judaism obeying the mitzvot is a path for drawing closer to God. Just as Buddhists meditate to achieve Enlightenment—to draw close to God—Jews do mitzvot.

If we can engage in a process of “mindful obedience,” of being aware of what we are doing and why, when we obey the commandments we can transform the most mundane of activities into a path of spiritual growth. A Chabad rabbi friend of mine told me that when he goes to the grocery store, it’s a religious experience: because he knows that he is shopping to buy food to sustain his family so they can perform mitzvot and serve God.

The most mundane of activities can be a part of the “shoemaker’s treasure.” The message of the story of the shoemaker is perhaps a little more involved than it might appear at first. It doesn’t really help to just tell people that what they’re looking for is at home. If Chaim Mendel had felt completely content, he never would have gone on the journey in the first place. Spiritual progress, like material progress, needs an element of discontent as a spur. Once on the journey, once he was searching, like so many of us are searching for answers to life’s most profound questions, he never would have known to look in the right place—which was at home—without someone there to point him in the right direction.

As your new rabbi, I hope that I will have the opportunity to serve as the officer in that story for you. To help you discover where the treasure is. Or if you already know the treasure is at home, in Judaism, to help you uncover it and unlock its secrets.

Shanah Tovah

Finding Faith

This sermon was given at Kol Nidre, 5766 in Toledo. It's an outline of my thoughts on how we can go about finding faith in God – a subject to which I hope to devote an entire book.

A story is told of a Beverly Hills tycoon who was dismayed by his son's decision to study in a yeshiva instead of joining the family business. After several years the son returned home to his father's sardonic question: So what have you got to show for your years of study? "I know that there is a God" replied the young man. Angrily the father leapt to his feet and pointed out the window at the elderly gardener patiently mowing the vast lawns. "He also knows there is a God" shouted the older man. "No father" the boy quietly responded. "He believes there is a God, I know."

You may be wondering, what's the difference between believing in God and knowing there is a God?

The difference is huge. Many people who believe in God, believe in God as an abstract concept. Sort of the way they believe that $E = MC^2$, or the way they believe the theory of evolution. Lots of people believe —yet it does not have much impact on their lives. It's not something that changes their behavior in any discernible fashion.

Believing in God can work much the same way. For example, some people believe in God as explained by Baruch Spinoza and Mordecai Kaplan: God is simply the impersonal force that made the Big Bang go bang. Belief in the God of Spinoza will bring all of the passion and commitment to your life that believing in the Big Bang theory will bring to your life. There is nothing personal about such a God. Simply believing in God does not make someone a religious person—80% of all Jews say they mostly agree that there is a God, and 56% of all Jews are quite certain that God exists—yet only 7% of Jews describe themselves as "religious."

But if you KNOW God exists—just as surely as you know you yourself exist—if you have a relationship with God just like you have a relationship with your spouse or your best friend—your life is totally transformed.

To KNOW God exists—that is to have true faith. The Slonimer rebbe tells us that *emunab*, faith, is the secret of existence, it is the breath of life, it is the life-giving breath of Torah, the mitzvot, and all of Judaism. Belief is in your head – faith is in your heart.

Almost all Jews would agree that the one statement that sums up the essence of Judaism is *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, Listen up Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. The word “*shema*” is written in the imperative—it’s a command, it’s insistent. The word *shema* contains the Hebrew word *m’ai*, which is Hebrew for *kishkes*, or guts. The Shema is telling us more than just listen, more than just understand, but get it into your guts – KNOW – that Adonai is our God and She is One.

Maimonides, Rambam, wrote in the Mishneh Torah “The foundation of the entire structure and the pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a Fundamental Cause (God).” Not simply to believe – but to know. To have faith.

The Slonimer rebbe wrote that faith is the altar of love on which was spilled the blood of millions of Jews. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jews in Europe were persecuted, and they were offered the opportunity to abandon their faith and become Christian to avoid punishment. Millions refused, because of their faith in God—because they *knew* the God of Israel in their guts, not because they merely “believed” that God existed.

What if all those prayers we recite tonight are really true? What if God really does want Jews to follow the Torah? What if all of our deeds really are being recorded for posterity and God does care what we do? What if God really does decide who is going to die and who is going to live?

If you knew those things in your guts—on a deeper level than just believing them intellectually—do you think you would act differently? What would be different? Would you come to shul more often, give more money to charity, go out of your way to be kinder and more thoughtful?

And more than just behaving differently—what would it feel like? Can you imagine what it would feel like to have that kind of faith in God? Faith and trust come together—if you have that kind of knowledge of God, you will also have a great sense of *bitachon*, of trust, that whatever happens God is there for you—somehow things will work out.

The confidence that God is there, God is real, and everything will work out is described in a teaching of one of the great rabbis of the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva. Rabbi Akiva taught: A person should always say: (Aramaic) *Kol d'avid rachmanab l'tav*...“Everything that God does, He does for the good.”

To illustrate the point, the Talmud brings a story about Rabbi Akiva. The rabbi was traveling, and when he arrived at a certain town he asked for lodgings and was refused. R. Akiva said: “*Kol d'avid rachmanab l'tav*, everything that God does, He does for the good,” and he went to spend the night in a field.

He had with him a rooster, a donkey and a lamp. A wind came and extinguished the lamp, a cat came and ate the rooster, and a lion came and ate the donkey. Once again he said “Everything that God does, He does for good.” That night, an army came and took the entire town captive. Rabbi Akiva told his disciples: “Didn’t I tell you that everything that God does, He does for good? If I had a room in town, the army would have taken me. If the lamp had been lit, the army would have seen me; if the donkey would have brayed or the rooster would have called, the army would have come and captured me.”

What are in many ways even more impressive are the generations of Jews who would say *kol d'avid rachmanab l'tav* without necessarily seeing how it did work out for the best. Rabbi Akiva would have still said “Everything that

God does, He does for the good” even if he had continued traveling in the opposite direction and never heard the news that the town had been taken captive.

Having that kind of faith and trust in God, *knowing* that God cares about you, not only leads a person to greater piety, but it leads a person to a great sense of inner peace and calm. Faith in God, knowing God, will give a person strength to face the tragedies that every life encounters. It doesn't mean that you won't experience tragedies—it just means that when the inevitable tragedies occur you have greater strength to deal with them. And it will make every moment richer and more pleasant—you're never alone if you have a close relationship with God.

And relationship with God is what faith is about. There is no commandment to believe in God. But there is a commandment, part of the Shema, to love God. What's more, the commandment is to love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. To have a love of God just as intense as the love you have for your husband or wife, or the love you have for your children.

That kind of love does not come from an intellectual belief—you don't love your children because you believe they are real. You love your children because you *know* them—because you have a very deep relationship with them.

But if you don't have that kind of faith—if you don't have that kind of love for God—can it be cultivated? Or is it just some kind of gift from God, which some people are blessed with, and others aren't?

Thirty years ago, when I was a 19 year old enlisted man serving in the US Army in Ft. Hood, Texas I experienced a case of “faith envy.” I was a spiritual seeker: I read vary widely in psychology, philosophy, and religion in an attempt to figure out what the world was all about.

I took a class in philosophy at Central Texas College, and became friends with the professor, Phil. We would sit around his living room drinking

French wine (Medoc), and while our then wives fell asleep on the couch out of boredom we would excitedly explore the ideas of Aristotle, Kant, Hume, and Heidegger.

Phil had spent ten years in a seminary studying to become a Roman Catholic priest. He eventually concluded that being a priest was not the path for him: he wanted to get married and share his life with a woman. So he left the seminary and got married, but he didn't leave his faith. Phil was the first person I met whose intellect I respected who also had a deep and sincere faith and belief in God. I felt my intellect was a huge barrier to faith: how could someone who took science for granted, who believed in Evolution, not the Creation story of the Bible, have faith? I envied his faith. I saw it as a beautiful thing, to have faith in God, in the world, and your place in it. I figured I didn't have it because I lost the "faith lottery." It seemed to me then that faith was one of those things that you are either blessed with, or not. It didn't seem to me that there was anything you could do to get it. Somehow some people just got tapped with the magic wand that made them believers—the rest of us were left out.

I was struggling with the major life questions so much—I wished somehow that magic wand could be waved for me too and I would have that faith. I felt like the kid standing outside the closed candy store, looking in the window and wishing I could get inside.

It seemed obvious to me at the time that you cannot decide to believe. You can decide to act as if something is true. You can decide to intellectually accept something if you think you see evidence for it. But if you don't see compelling evidence you can't decide you are going to believe. You can't simply decide to have faith.

But what I've learned as the result of a long spiritual journey is that you *can* decide you would like to have faith; and that decision can open the door that leads down the path to a real relationship with God.

I'm not claiming to be some kind of *tzaddik*, saintly righteous person. I'm not saying I'm the most pious person in this room tonight. I certainly haven't reached the level of Rabbi Akiva who could say: "*Kol d'avid rachmanab l'tav*, everything that God does is for the good" in the face of a disaster, and really, sincerely, truly believe it my guts.

But I have gone from a place of having no faith to having at least a modest amount of faith. I've gone from feeling very distant from God to feeling at least some connection with God. There are probably as many ways to find faith as there are people seeking faith. What I want to share with you tonight are a few things that have helped me in my journey, in the hopes that they may help some of you.

The first step in a developing a real relationship with God is to be open to the idea that God exists.

About six weeks ago I gave a sermon about this first step. For those of you who were in shul that Saturday morning, or who read it when I sent it to the shul's email list, please pardon my repetition—but remember as the Talmud says, one who learns something 100 times is not to be compared to the one who learns it 101 times.

Rabbi Milton Steinberg wrote a novelized account of the life of Elisha ben Abuya, a rabbi of the Sanhedrin who went the opposite direction of the one we're trying to go in—he lost his faith. As Steinberg tells the story, Elisha grew up living in the tension between a secular father who promoted Greek learning and a Jewishly observant uncle who banned studying Greek books. As a young man, Elisha was sent off to study with a great rabbi, and eventually earns the title rabbi himself along with a seat on the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of the day. But Elisha is plagued by doubt. He can't simply accept things on faith. He tells his friend and colleague Rabbi Akiva that he is going to embark on an intellectual search for God that will hopefully restore his faith. Elisha was very impressed with Euclid's *Elements of Geometry*—by the "lucidity of the

reasoning and the sureness of its results.” Elisha resolves to follow a similar approach to God: he tells Akiva “I am going to start at the beginning, by laying aside all prejudices, all preconceived notions, all my beliefs and affirmations.”

The next several chapters of the book tell how Elisha gives up the rabbinite, gives up Judaism, immerses himself in an all out study of Greek math, logic, and philosophy for several years. After years of preparation and training, he finally struggles with the question and starts writing furiously. And he fails miserably. At the end of the day he can’t really say anything about God—he can’t even deny God. He’s right back where he started.

The fundamental problem that Elisha ran into is that you can’t go all the way back to nothing. Any system of knowledge ultimately demands that you make certain assumptions. With all the beauty and logic of Euclid’s geometry, it rests on five postulates—five ideas that are taken to be true without proof. All other proofs are built on those postulates. Remove the postulates—remove the underlying assumptions—and you can’t prove a thing.

The primary postulate for monotheists is found in the Torah in Deuteronomy chapter 4 verse 39: *Hu Elohim bashamayim mima’al v’al ha’aretz mitachat, ein od*, He is God in the heavens above and the earth below, there is no other.

So the first step is to “postulate God.” To accept the idea that God exists. Note that at this point there is lots of room for doubt and questions. Even accepting Spinoza’s God, God as the watchmaker, God who made the Big Bang go *boom*, is enough to open the door.

And that’s all it does is open the door. If surveys are correct, over 80% of us here tonight would claim we believe in God. But how many of us *know* God exists, how many of us have *emunah shleimah*, complete faith, and *bitachon*, trust, that God cares about us?

Once I accepted the intellectual possibility that God exists, I was in a position to go looking for proof that God exists. A book that I found very helpful in my quest for God is Rabbi Elliot Dorff’s “Knowing God: Jewish

Journeys to the Unknowable.” Rabbi Dorff brings a lot of useful ideas in his book, but there are two in particular I found helpful—the Invisible Gardener parable, and the concept of non-hypothetical discovery.

John Wisdom’s Invisible Gardener parable goes as follows: “Two people return to their long neglected garden and find among the weeds a few of the old plants surprisingly vigorous. One says to the other, “It must be that a gardener has been coming and doing something about these plants.” Upon inquiry, they find that no neighbor has ever seen anyone at work in their garden. The first man says to the other, “He must have worked while people slept.” The other says, “No, someone would have heard him, and besides, anybody who cared about plants would have kept down these weeds.” The first man says, “Look at the way these are arranged. There is purpose and a feeling for beauty here. I believe someone comes, someone invisible to mortal eyes. I believe the more carefully we look, the more we shall find confirmation of this.”

While you can’t decide to believe in God, you can decide to look at the world through God-colored lenses. If you go looking for evidence that God exists, you will find plenty. When we lived in Vancouver we would sit on our deck and watch the sun setting over Vancouver Island across the water—and even our kids would see evidence that God exists, praising God for doing good work.

The other idea from Rabbi Dorff’s book that impressed me is the idea of the non-hypothetical discovery. Most people approach their search for God the way they learned to approach inquiry in science class in school. Hypothesis: God exists. They then go looking for evidence to support or disprove that hypothesis. But there is a completely different kind of knowledge we can use—non-hypothetical knowledge, knowledge that does not rest on formulating a hypothesis. When we fall in love, most of us don’t formulate a hypothesis and weigh the evidence whether or not we love someone. We just know it in our hearts.

And that's really our goal—not to know God in our heads, the way we would know a scientific fact, but to know God in our hearts, the way we know we love someone.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel teaches us that the path to knowing God in our hearts is through the ability to feel awe or wonder at the world around us. One of the great disservices of our secular education system is that all too often we take away the sense of awe a child can feel at the world and replace it with rational explanations. Something important is lost when we lose the sense of awe.

Heschel says “Ultimate meaning and ultimate wisdom are not found within the world, but in God, and the only way to wisdom is through our relationship to God. That relationship is awe. Awe, in this sense, is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding. Awe is itself an act of insight into a meaning greater than ourselves.” As Heschel describes it, “Awe is a way of being in rapport with the mystery of all reality.”

Being able to feel awe does not mean you have to hide yourself from science. One of my hobbies is teaching people how to fly. As such, I teach people all about the aerodynamics involved in flight, about how the four forces of thrust, drag, lift, and gravity affect the aircraft. I know this stuff so well when I go flying I can look at the window and practically visualize the big “H” for high pressure below the wing and the big “L” for low pressure above the wing—yet I can still feel a sense of awe and wonder that I’m cruising around thousands of feet above the ground.

Postulating God, recovering a sense of wonder at the world around us, and being open to a non-hypothetical discovery of God—being open to “falling in love with God,” if you will—prepares our hearts for the Jewish path to cultivating a relationship with God: Torah and the mitzvot, the commandments.

Like anything worthwhile, cultivating a relationship with God takes time and effort. If you have a friend you talk to two or three times a year, you

are not going to be as close him as a friend you talk to three times a day. It works the same way with God: if you only talk to God twice a year, on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, you're probably not going to have a very close relationship. Which is why the Jewish tradition calls on us to pray three times a day—to check in with God three times a day, just as you might check in with a person you love deeply several times during the day.

Our liturgy throws an amazing amount of stuff at us—some of the words we read in our prayers are beautiful poetry, other words may be things that our minds rebel at or have trouble with. Rebbe Nachman of Breslov teaches that the path to faith is in your prayers you should focus on the things that resonate with you as true. Don't spend so much time on the things that challenge your faith or trouble you—save that for study. But let your prayers be a time to focus on the words that harmonize with your soul, that you find beautiful, that confirm your faith in God.

Another teaching of Rebbe Nachman's that I found helpful was to practice *hitbodedut*, which is a kind of Jewish meditation where you set aside a fixed time—say 15 or 20 minutes to start—to talk to God the way you talk to a friend. To pour your heart out to God the way you would pour your heart out to your most intimate trusted confidant. This sounds like something simple, but I have actually found it to be a very profound spiritual practice. Most of us don't spend enough time just talking to God.

Any relationship should be a two-way street, and our relationship with God is no exception. If praying is the way we talk to God, how does God talk to us? For Jews the answer is through studying the Torah. Just as we set aside time every day to talk to God, we set aside time every day to allow God to talk to us. Studying Torah does not have to mean just picking up the Bible and reading it—there are many Jewish books you can read where you can hear the word of God coming through to you.

Ultimately, not just study and prayer, but obeying any of the commandments can become a vehicle for strengthening your faith in and your relationship with God. Observing the Sabbath becomes a way to make the time needed to reflect on God and the universe. Observing the dietary laws is a way to bring an awareness of God to mind multiple times throughout the day. Giving charity can be not just a “good deed,” but a way to serve God, and therefore a way to strengthen your bond with God.

And that, I believe, is really the purpose of all of those rules we have in Judaism—done with the proper *kavanah*, the proper intentions, we can continually find opportunities to raise our God-consciousness, to raise our awareness of God’s presence in the world, in the most mundane of activities. My favorite example is literally the most mundane of activities—there is a blessing to say after using the bathroom, which emphasizes how miraculously our bodies are created with all of these intricate openings that have to function just so. Anyone who has ever suffered from constipation—or from a heart attack—can certainly appreciate how miraculous it is that everything works so well so much of the time.

It is a miracle that our bodies work so well so much of the time. By saying a prayer, we remind ourselves of that miracle, and we remind ourselves of God’s presence behind that miracle. As Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi puts it “God is real. That’s what escaped us in Hebrew school and in books we read.”

God is real. Knowing that—not just believing it, but really knowing it—absolutely can change your life for the better.

Today is Yom Kippur, the day the tradition says we are at our closest in our relationship with God. We stand before God purified and forgiven for our sins. We imitate the angels, not eating, drinking, or thinking of other physical needs.

In the Ashrei prayer we say *karov Adonai l'chol kor'av, l'chol asher yikrao-boo b'emet*, God is near to all who call, to all who call out to Him in truth.

God is waiting to draw near to us—but nothing happens until we call out to God first.

May God open our hearts to the Divine that is all around us, especially in our fellow human beings, and may God help us live lives that emulate God's traits of kindness and compassion,

Amen