



Rosh Hashanah 2008

**“THE HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION:
SEEKING OUT A HEALTHY SKEPTICISM”**

**Introductory Remarks
by Rabbi Peter H. Schweitzer**

Are there really alligators crawling around in New York City sewers?

Does eating carrots really improve night vision?

Do miracle grow products really grow hair?

Can you trust the New York Times to be unbiased and to tell the truth?

Can you trust politicians to keep their word and tell the truth – or is all verbiage?

We are bombarded daily by facts, claims and assertions that have the appearance of accuracy and authenticity, but how much of it is really reliable – especially in a season of competing political ads? Even the fact-checkers themselves come under scrutiny.

How can we trust what is in front of us? And if we can't, then what? It can make for a very unstable, anxiety-provoking world.

And what happens when we apply this same mistrust to religion? Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher, drew attention to three key intellectual figures of the 20th century—Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud—who, he said, adopted a “hermeneutics of suspicion” to unmask and distinguish the real from the apparent.

Separately, and for different reasons, they concluded that religion was an illusion, a refuge for the weak, an escape from reality. While religion appears to be concerned with lofty ideas of transcendence and personal salvation, its real function, they said, was to distract us from the reality of our miserable lives and, one might cynically add, keep people in their place.

As a people and as a culture, and particularly as secular humanistic Jews, we have been experts at taking the skeptical view on things. We ask lots and lots of questions, routinely answering one with another, and why not? Being a “doubting Thomas” (or a “doubting Abraham”) is a good thing, not a sign of heresy or, put more politely, oppositional behavior.

Unlike more traditional attitudes, we don't just accept what is handed down to us, whether it's the story of creation, the account of the Exodus, the myth of Chanukah or any other aspect of our history. Instead, we rely on critical inquiry to seek out the truth. And we encourage the same attitude in our children even if it means we empower them to press us for evidence and challenge our own claims and assertions.

In fact, going all the way back to our rabbinic legends, we tell a famous story about doubting Abraham who showed his skepticism at an early age when he destroyed all his father's idols. He left a hammer in the hand of one intact idol and then told his father that that one had done the damage. His father, to his credit, didn't believe the story one moment and said, likewise, that the idols had no strength and were an illusion. Both father and son were iconoclasts. But the father depended on these idols, false as they were, to make a living, and that's what made him furious.

We're proud of our legacy of asking questions. At the very least, it keeps us on our toes. But how far do we take it? When does healthy skepticism turn into endless satire and unhealthy cynicism? If all truths are relative, or if everything is malleable, is there any solid ground to stand on? And finally, is religion really an illusion and if so, what are we doing here today? And if not, what purpose does it hold for us?

We've invited two of our members to contemplate these questions and bring their own hermeneutics of suspicion to these matters. We're privileged now to listen to their reflections.

First we'll hear from Daniel Radosh, then from Nancy Friedman.