



**Rosh Hashanah 2008 – Discussion Topic**

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

**Reflections**  
**by Nancy Friedman**

Truthiness.

That’s TV host Stephen Colbert’s word (now in Merriam-Webster by the way) for “the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than concepts or facts known to be true.”

When Colbert first coined the word on his show he used the Iraq War as an example. “The facts may have proved us wrong.” He said. “But didn’t the invasion just feel right?”

Truthiness, then, is the opposite of skepticism. Where a skeptic questions the validity of things that can’t be proven true, -- like, say, that a certain Alaskan governor is ready to be Vice President -- the Truthi-ac just plain likes her.

Truthiness is also completely antithetical to Jewish tradition. We don’t just *feel* things and then decide they are so. We scrutinize, we agonize, we analyze. There are endless debates about everything from whether or not one can eat rice on Passover, to whether we light the menorah from right to left or left to right, to whether or not pastrami on white is a punishable offense.

As Humanists, especially, as Peter said, we question everything. I once read that the believer only has to justify the existence of God, and the atheist the existence of everything else. Well, for many of us, that leaves everything else.

So why, then, are we Humanists, we skeptics, here on this day – among the holiest for those who believe? You might say because of tradition. Or because you wanted to be a part of a community of like-minded people. Or even that you married a Jew and you had to come. You’d much rather be taking this day off from work cleaning out your closets. Or figuring out how to get your pictures from your camera to your computer.

For many of us, the traditional Rosh Hashanah Torah readings are about the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, and the Abraham/Isaac story. For those of you who are a little rusty, here’s how they go. (more or less)

God has promised elderly Abraham and Sarah that Sarah will have a son. They are both skeptical, to say the least. In fact, they laugh at him. So when Sarah does not quickly bear a son for Abraham, she allows her husband to have a child with a slave girl, Hagar. Ishmael is born.

Thirteen years later, when Sarah is ninety and Abraham 100, they finally have a son, Isaac, born, tradition says, on Rosh Hashanah. Suddenly, Sarah doesn't want competition around. So she tells Abraham to cast both Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert. Abraham, to his credit, thinks this is a terrible idea, but God, believe it or not, gives him the go-ahead. Luckily, God also steps in just in the nick of time to save both mother and child.

This would seem like a good time for “they all lived happily ever after,” but the next thing we know, God asks Abraham to prove his devotion by sacrificing Isaac to him. This time, Abraham isn't skeptical at all. He simply obeys. But God steps in (just in the nick of time) and tells Abraham that it was all a test. God wanted to make sure that Abraham would obey – and since he would, he didn't have to.

I asked my eight year old son, Avery, what he thought of the first story. Of Hagar, Sarah and Ishmael. “Impossible” he said. “Sarah is too old to have a baby.”

“What about Abraham?” I asked.

“Oh, he's a man, he can have babies any time.” Already a wiseguy and a skeptic.

When Peter first asked me to speak at Rosh Hashanah, I immediately thought of these stories and how they were among the reasons -- along with all that standing up and sitting down -- I stopped going to traditional High Holy Day services. I just didn't buy it. I could believe that Sarah, in her jealousy, would cast out the mother and illegitimate son of her husband. But even if Hagar and Ishmael did survive – I'm not buying that God came down to make it so. And I'm with my son – maybe some of us are having children later in life....but 90? I don't think so.

I also don't believe that God spoke to Abraham and told him to kill his own son. I don't believe God ever comes down and tells anyone anything. Makes it sound like God is a Junior High School Vice Principal: “Don't make me get Vice Principal Adonai down here!” I don't buy it. I just don't. Doesn't have Truthiness, I guess.

So the story isn't true. It's a myth. So what? Picasso said that “Art is a lie that tells the truth.” I say, “A myth is a lie that tells the truth.” So this is our myth. The myth repeated on Rosh Hashanah. But what truth does it tell? And what is truth anyway?

As Humanistic Jews, we don't particularly depend on this myth, or even connect it to the holiday. Humanistic Jews believe that “We possess the power and responsibility to shape our own lives independent of supernatural authority.” So we don't believe or necessarily even tell the Rosh Hashanah story. We don't even acknowledge a supernatural authority. Why, then, do we honor the holiday at all?

It must be because whether we believe them or not, these stories, this culture, our history, has something to teach us. Something that transcends our skepticism and cynicism. Because even if we don't think these stories are absolutely true, we also know that “truth” isn't all it's cracked up to be. Because I am talking about “truth” as opposed to accuracy. Truth goes beyond the facts. Real truth has, well, Truthiness.

In the case of the story of Sarah and Abraham, the Human saga is the truth. The laughter of surprise and disbelief. The doubt, the jealousy, the pride, the hardness of heart. These ring true. And if we are skeptical about other aspects of the story...so what?

Maybe we don't need to believe in something to see the truth in it.

Like the Tooth Fairy. The last time my daughter, Rachel, lost a tooth, the Tooth Fairy "forgot to come."

"The tooth fairy NEVER CAME!!!" my daughter sobbed as she burst into our room that morning. "And I know what that means, you're the tooth fairy and you forgot."

My son – the skeptic – was extremely helpful: "Oh come on. The tooth fairy is like Santa Claus," he said. "It's just made up."

My daughter looked stricken. "Mommy, is it true? Is the Tooth Fairy made up? Like Santa Claus?"

Now I had a problem. My husband and I don't want our kids to believe in Santa Claus – the commercialism, the materialism, the fact that if they believed they'd feel terrible that he doesn't come to our house. But the Tooth Fairy? She's about the wondrous – dare I say miraculous -- process of growing up.

"Ok," I said, I'll tell you the truth." And then I lied. "The first time, the tooth fairy really does come. But after that, she *tries* to get to every child who loses a tooth, but she just doesn't have enough magic. So she counts on parents to check to see if she's left a present. And last night, Daddy and I forgot to check."

And just like that, she believed again.

I am moved at the ability of faith to supersede all reason. I am amazed by my own daughter's ability to understand and forgive. And I realize – I didn't lie to my daughter. Because there *is* a magical fairy-like quality to that first lost tooth. Even for children who willingly suspend their disbelief, the Tooth Fairy matters. And not just because of the cash. The tooth fairy is part of the ritual of childhood. She is only the vehicle of the myth, not the truth of it. The truth is, the myth of the Tooth Fairy soothes the pain of a losing a tooth, the fear of growing older, the embarrassment of having two front teeth way too big for your face...or of not having them at all for a while. The tooth fairy is part of the mythical time we call childhood.

There's a truthiness to that.

I talk about the Tooth Fairy myth, because it speaks to why skeptics – why we – are here today. Because even if we don't believe in 90 year-old women having children, even if we don't believe in Deus ex Machina – the divine hand of God saving us just in the nick of time, even if we don't believe in the Tooth Fairy, we believe in the ritual of it all.

For me, at least, the fact that Rosh Hashanah rituals have been carried out for thousands of years is important. There is a cumulative power in generations of repetition of the same acts, the same words, the same stories on the same days. I may be skeptical of the reasons people perform these rituals, but I don't question the validity of ritual itself.

So we humanists *can* believe in the Truth of this Holiday, its essence.

In the idea that once a year, we should take stock of our lives. Look back on our actions and see what we think of them. Were we jealous? Hard-hearted? Proudful? Did we hurt others to better ourselves? Were we good parents, looking out for our children – and not “sacrificing” them to our jobs, our busy lives?

We may be skeptical about the particulars of the holiday’s stories. Or about the words in the traditional liturgy that tell us to look outside of ourselves for truth. But we still believe in looking for that truth, and in using whatever myths, traditions, and rituals will help us discover the truth of who we are – and what we will become.

But one last thing about the Tooth Fairy.

I heard a story on NPR a few years ago, about a little girl named Rebecca who had a friend named Rachel Loberfeld. One day, Rachel Loberfeld told Rebecca that she knew who the tooth fairy was. The night before, she had seen her *own father* taking her tooth from under her pillow. Rebecca ran all the way home and told her mother that she knew all about the tooth fairy. “It’s Rachel Loberfeld’s Daddy.” She said. “Ronnie Loberfeld is the tooth fairy.”

I love this story. Because it tells me that even in the face of facts, people find a way to hold on to magic. And who is to tell us where the magic may lie? In the stories of Rosh Hashanah? In the ritual of lighting candles? Of blessing the wine? For me there is magic – and truth - in simply meeting here, on this day, holy or not – as a congregation, a community that in its very joining, is helping each one of us to find his or her own truth. Together, on this day, we give each other the support we need to be honest in our assessment of our lives.

The night of my Tooth Fairy fiasco, as I tucked my daughter in, I felt something under her pillow. It was a note: "Dear Tooth Fairy," It read "I'm sorry I didn't believe in you. I know you're very busy. Love, Rachel." It’s hard to be cynical about that.

So on this Rosh Hashanah I wish you all a good year. One filled with unanswerable questions. And maybe some discoveries. And hopefully, some Truthiness.

La Shana Tovah