



Yom Kippur 2016

**“I DON’T HAVE THAT KIND OF FAITH”
by Rabbi Peter Schweitzer**

Those of you who have attended one of our bar or bat mitzvahs will recall that at the end of the service the students are asked to read a declaration called “Taking My Place.” It opens with the these two thoughts:

“I will reflect upon the teachings and experiences of our people and the lessons of my own life and draw from them the messages and values that are meaningful and sensible to me.

“I will have the courage and *chutzpa* to question ancient teachings and not accept them automatically simply because they come from long ago.”

Now it is clearly a sign of the times and perhaps an unintended consequence of our successful acculturation, that not all our students immediately know the word *chutzpa*, not to mention how to pronounce it properly. So we get an extra teaching moment with them.

But for an older generation, *chutzpa* is a useful and favorite Yiddish term that has enriched our everyday conversation, and hopefully will enter the vocabulary of our kids as well.

Chutzpa is commonly defined as audacity and nerve. It derives from a Hebrew word that means insolence. Depending on the tone, it flirts with becoming an expression of unmitigated gall or effrontery, like claiming that seriously lewd remarks are just harmless locker room talk.

The classic illustration is the example of a man who has killed his parents, admits his guilt, and then pleads to the judge to be merciful because he is now an orphan.

A little over two years ago in August, when my father died of natural causes at 93, which was thirty-two years after my mother had died of ovarian cancer at 58, I became an orphan. I was almost 62, but still, some things never change.

I had intended to share reflections with you last Yom Kippur about that first year of mourning. In fact, my talk was 90% finished. But then an uncaring universe had the *chutzpa* to deal me a deck of cards that included a chronic back problem that, up to then, had responded well to injections and medications. But now it had gotten worse.

Myrna and I met with a surgeon in early September to review my case. He gently and hesitantly told me I’d need surgery. He clearly didn’t relish being the conveyor of this news, but

I was a step ahead of him. I had been waiting for this pronouncement for several years already so, to some degree, it was as much a relief to finally get on with the inevitable.

The question that I did have, however, was how soon did I need the surgery. The High Holidays were coming up fast. Oren was going to be performing in a high school musical in early November, and I was looking forward to attending an important Civil Rights conference in Little Rock later that month. Would I be ready to travel by then?

The surgeon paused. “Well,” he said, “time is not your friend, so the sooner the better, but I don’t like to mess with people’s faith.” What he implied was: He didn’t want to ask someone to not practice his or her religion to have surgery that he felt shouldn’t be postponed.

I didn’t give him a chance to finish his thought. I said, “I don’t have that kind of faith. Mine isn’t in a protective deity, but in the hands of a good doctor!” We live in a city with an array of the greatest medical choices, and it didn’t hurt that my nephew was in his 2nd year of residency at the hospital and could email the surgeon a note asking him to see me as a professional courtesy. I also know fully well that others aren’t cut that same break, or given the privilege to jump the line, or get access to the care that I had.

And then I calculated in my head and I said, “How about if I lead services on Rosh Hashanah – a little over a week away – and then come in the next day and let others take over for me for Yom Kippur?” He thought that was a good plan. So did my conscience, which did not fear some kind of wrathful retribution for skipping out on our secular humanistic version of the Day of Atonement. Recovery from spinal surgery would be ample affliction.

I am pleased to say the operation went well but I did have a momentary, unexpected difficulty during the first day in recovery when I was under the influence of some nifty painkillers. I had been very chatty and, I’m told, even funny, when one of the nurses casually said to me, “By the way, what do you do?”

I paused before I answered. How much should I reveal about myself and my belief system? Would my answer befriend them or distance them? Would the staff continue to give me the care I needed or subtly be less available when I called for them? One slight and they might ignore my call button interminably.

Years earlier, when I was a rabbinic student in Cincinnati, my apartment mate and I had become friends with our speech professor, Lowell McCoy, and his wife, Carolyn. We sometimes joined them for Sunday church services because their pastor, Emerson Colaw, was an outstanding speaker and we got ideas from his talks. One day he told a story about being on an airplane. He would have preferred losing himself in his book when the person next to him asked him, “What do you do?” Reverend Colaw decided he would tell his neighbor the truth, that he was a Methodist minister, in the hope that the man would then leave him alone.

So I briefly thought about telling the nurses in the hospital that I, too, was a Methodist minister, but instead I engaged them in the following Socratic dialogue:

What do you think I do?

Are you a professor?

Not exactly, but I do teach.

Do you teach about music?

(Where did that come from, I wondered?)

No, but I'm interested in music...

Then I took a breath and said, I teach about history and religion.

Another big breath. I'm a Humanistic rabbi.

Now do you remember the scene in Alice's Restaurant when Arlo Guthrie is put in a holding pen with the Group W's – that's where they put you if you may not be moral enough to join the Army after committing your special crime. So he was there with all these mean, nasty, ugly-looking people and one comes up to him and says, "Kid, whad'ya get?" And Arlo said, "I didn't get nothing, I had to pay \$50 and pick up the garbage." And the mean guy said, "What were you arrested for, kid?" And I said, "Littering." And they all moved away from me on the bench ... till I said, "...and creating a nuisance." And they all came back, shook my hand, and we had a great time on the bench, talkin' about all kinds of groovy things that we was talking about on the bench."

Well, the nurses never moved away from me on the bench and seemed totally tolerant, if not supportive, of the kind of nuisance that we were espousing.

First I had to launch into an explanation about different types of Jews. Before I could get very far one said, Like how some wear different head coverings, do you?

No, I said. I'm of the kind of Jews who don't wear head coverings. Because it represents a belief in God that I don't share. There are very Orthodox Jews, I said, who wear black hats and black clothing –

-- And those hair pieces, one of them interrupted.

Right, I said, but I don't have them.

And then I pressed forward: There are Jews who believe in God, and there are Jews who doubt whether God exists, or who don't believe in God....I'm one of them, who think it doesn't matter or enter into our daily lives....

Well, the nurses took this all in stride and practically were sitting on my bed by now, eager to talk more and not get back to their duties. Then one said – total non sequitur – can you tell us what the meaning of breaking the glass at the end of the wedding is all about?

And I thought – this question is chasing me – I just talked about it at the previous Shabbat – and explained the destruction of the Temple and how the story is told that the glass gets broken to remember it ... but it doesn't make sense to me to have a sad moment in a wedding.

And the nurses all nodded in agreement.

I said, You know how some Greeks break plates at the end of a wedding – and one interjected – I'm half-Greek and half African-American. Well, I said, I think breaking the glass and the plates is trying to scare away – and I paused and she said, “evil spirits”, and another said, “it's all superstition, I think this religion stuff is all crap.”

Well, we could have gone on talkin' for a long while, sharing groovy ideas about the universe, religion, medical care, politics, who knows what else, but they had to get back to their duties and I was ready for a nap.

Needless to say, my worries were for nought. We were old friends by now, and we came together because of our common humanity that transcended any religious differences. If only this spirit of inclusion and listening and accepting multiple answers as different truths would, like a pebble that causes beautiful ripples in a lake, radiate out from the safe ecumenical zone of the hospital into the less friendly world we inhabit.

As a secular humanist, with a Jewish historical and cultural overlay, I am a realist about life's travails. I believe we live in an amoral universe that doesn't care too much about us personally. Bad things happen to good people all the time. Bad people also get away with bad things all the time. But this doesn't make it right. We don't have to sit idly by and say, “Stuff happens.” Rather, we must try to change the system when we can – by enacting new laws, by electing new officials, by speaking out against injustice and racism. Or, in the arena of health, by expanding our knowledge, developing new drugs, by making healthcare affordable and accessible to all. On a personal level, we can cope with these challenges by looking inward for courage, turning to family and friends for strength, and to our collective communities of compassion and support.

As much as I believe in taking charge, being pro active, I have also learned that sometimes we can't help but be reactive and even passive or, more accurately, patient. There was a period during that first year of grief after my father's death that I had to admit to myself that I was depressed. Saddened by loss, shaken by my own mortality, I experienced fatigue physically, emotionally and intellectually.

The worst of it was that I could only observe what was happening, but not change it. I had plenty of self-awareness. Know thyself, and I did. But I couldn't seem to alter the inner machinery that was driving forward at its own pace and direction. And that's when I decided that the best thing was to go along for the ride. To trust that this was a natural grieving and healing process. That the best advice I have certainly given others and now needed to heed myself was: Relax, be patient, don't rush it, it will resolve itself. Likewise, I could not speed up the healing my body needed after my surgery last fall. I had to wait several months before I was even allowed to start physical therapy.

In the story of the great flood, after it stopped raining for 40 days and 40 nights it took another 150 days before the waters receded and the ark settled on Mt. Ararat. Even then, they couldn't disembark yet. It took another 40 days before the tops of the mountains were exposed. And then, it still wasn't time to leave the ark until the dove returned with an olive branch that meant new nourishment was available, and even then, Noah was not ready. He waited another week, sent out the dove one more time, and when it did not return, Noah knew that it was finally time to exit the ark and start their lives over again. Each one of us, at moments of loss and crisis, change and challenge, need to weather our own storms, and wait for them to abate, on their own accord.

I know it doesn't work this way for everybody, but as I approached the first anniversary of my father's death, I turned a corner. I felt that the weight of loss had become lighter and more bearable. My natural predilection to qualified optimism had been restored. And, in the famous words of our contemporary sages, the Beatles, "it's getting better all the time."

May the year ahead be one of renewed strength, courage, hope, and healthy chutzpa.

Shana tovah.