

Yom Kippur Morning 5769/2008

It has been a little over seven years since that terrible day that changed the world forever.

Here in Australia, the events unfolded late in the evening and through the night.

Images were beamed live via satellite from the other side of the globe.

None of us will forget that day, those unbelievable and horrific scenes.

I was studying in Cincinnati, Ohio, in my second year of rabbinical school at the founding campus of the Hebrew Union College.

The first session of the day had begun and we were learning about some esoteric intricacy of Biblical Hebrew Grammar with our tutor, an eccentric Baptist PhD student.

Then the mobile phones started ringing.

Then the Dean of the rabbinical school came running in and said that we should all go home, the campus was closed – there was an attack on New York City, planes were falling from the sky.

It wasn't safe.

The Dean's wife was in New York City at the time and, between looking after their two small children, he was left in Cincinnati looking after the rabbinical school.

There was panic in his eyes as he rushed off to pick up the kids from kindergarten and get home before trying to contact his wife again.

When I got home Rayna and I, like millions of others around the world, watched with a mix of disbelief, horror and outrage as the events of that day played out on the television screen.

I'll never forget the terror I felt when I could not get a phone call through to Australia.

This was before Skype.

All the phone lines were busy.

Airplane travel was halted.

In those first 12 hours, we didn't know whether the attack was over or whether it was the beginning of World War Three and the end of the world as we knew it.

I remember calculating how long it would take to drive from Cincinnati in the Midwest, 3000 kilometres to the West coast of the US, and then thinking about how hard it would be to get a boat to take us 12,000 kilometres across the Pacific and back to Melbourne. I remember suddenly feeling very, very far from home.

In Jewish terms, it's been a full sabbatical cycle, seven years, since those events occurred in September 2001, just days before the *Yammim Noraim*, the Days of Awe that welcomed in 5762.

I was reminded of that terrible day by a documentary that was screened around the anniversary of September 11 this year.

It was a documentary that wove together amateur footage from the video cameras of ordinary people. It was not the overplayed footage

to which so much of the time we have become numbed. There was no commentary, just raw images and sound from that day. It was haunting, and yet, I found it impossible to turn it off.

Friends, much has occurred since that day. In many ways the world is not the same as it was before September the 11th, 2001.

Much has been written about the complex dynamics that led a small group of human beings aiming for maximum human death to turn four domestic airplanes into cruise missiles.

Now I'm not a political scientist or an expert on Middle East affairs, but it seems to me that among all the different dynamics underlying the attacks of September 2001, among all the complicated ways of framing these events, is a struggle that emerged in the latter part of the 20th century and has continued to flourish in this new century. It's a struggle between two radically different worldviews. Two extreme worldviews that are both garnering more and more adherents as the years move on.

When looked at through just this one prism among many, the attacks of September 11 were attacks, by a small group of fundamentalist religious adherents on the one hand, against what they saw, on the other hand, as symbols of the decadent, god-less, atheistic western world.

And friends, these two world views – the fundamentalist and the atheistic – appear to be attracting growing numbers of adherents in recent years.

As we join together this Day of Atonement and consider our individual and collective mistakes of the year gone by and take a look at our own worldviews, I'd like us to spend a few minutes thinking about these two extreme and opposing worldviews – fundamentalism and atheism and what they mean for us.

Let's start with religious fundamentalism.

Sadly, it's not hard to think of examples of religious extremists of many different faiths that have used their fundamentalist attitude to justify despicable acts of violence.

Fundamentalist Muslims were behind the September 11 attacks.

Fundamentalist Christians have murdered doctors who perform abortions.

Fundamentalist Hindus have torched Mosques in India.

A fundamentalist Jew, Baruch Goldstein, killed Muslims at prayer.

Some in his community still regard him as a hero.

Another fundamentalist Jew assassinated an Israeli Prime Minister in his twisted version of Jewish faith. Some in his community still regard this murderer as a hero as well.

And fundamentalist religious figures have used theology to explain natural phenomena in shocking ways.

Just a couple of years ago when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, clerics representing three different fundamentalist religious perspectives each came out with statements.

They all agreed on one thing - they saw God's hand in the devastating storm.

A leading Fundamentalist Christian pastor (John Hagee in an interview on NPR) said that the storm was God's punishment for the slipping Christian values of America and the embrace of homosexuality in particular.

A fundamentalist Muslim cleric said that the storm was God's punishment for America's war in Iraq.

A fundamentalist Jew, former Sephardi Chief Rabbi of Israel and spiritual leader of the Israeli political party Shas, Ovadia Yosef, said at the time that the storm was God's punishment for America's support of the Israeli government's decision to move settlers out of the Gaza strip!

An objective observer might point out that they can't all be right. I'm sure most of us would agree that they are all very wrong!

By definition fundamentalists reject anything but a literalist reading of their scriptures meaning that, in general, they don't accept scientifically validated processes like evolution.

Growing numbers of people, particularly in the United States, but here too, are pushing for "Creationism" or its more sanitized equivalent, "Intelligent Design" to be taught in science classrooms alongside evolution – as though they were valid scientific propositions.

In at least one Ultra-Orthodox school in Melbourne textbooks are routinely censored of materials in apparent contradiction to classical Jewish beliefs.

With all of this going on in the worlds of religious fundamentalism – abuse of religion to justify violence, the manipulation of theology to justify hate, the inability to accept the discoveries of science that contradict accepted religious beliefs, with all of that, at first it's hard to understand how there can be a growing number of people, especially younger people, being drawn to fundamentalist religious expressions.

But the fact is that a small but significant number of Christians, Muslims and Jews are choosing to adhere to a more stringent form of their religion than their parents did.

Why are they drawn to take on stricter religious frameworks?

There are many possible reasons.

Firstly, it must be emphasised that the kinds of perverted religious views that led to the violence of September 11 or the murder of abortion doctors or of Muslims in prayer or of an Israeli Prime Minister, are by far the exception.

Hundreds of millions of religious individuals live out their lives with great humility and piety and in ways that enhance our world. Many of us know such people personally.

Fundamentalist religious groups raise money and create programs that help the poor in their own communities and around the world.

Furthermore, the vast majority of ultra religious people strive to practice the best of their religion, looking after the welfare of another's body and worrying about their own soul rather than looking after their own body and worrying about someone else's soul.

So despite the bad press, the vast majority of fundamentalist religious adherents live decent, peaceful lives.

Another reason that individuals are drawn to fundamentalist religious frameworks is that they provide certainty and predictability in an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable world.

There is a comfort that comes from believing that a set of beliefs and practices, faithfully lived, will bring about the best outcomes in this life and in the hereafter.

Seeking the direction of a religious sage can remove the need to make a tough decision oneself – about whom to marry and when, about what one can wear, what profession to follow and with whom to associate.

In the case of Judaism, an Ultra-Orthodox framework enables virtually every action and moment to be mediated through the dictates of the Shulhan Arukh and subsequent Halakhic rulings. So perhaps there is something attractive about the comfort that comes from trusting in what seems to be an authentic, true, religious expression.

A third reason for the growth of fundamentalist adherents is the sheer beauty and spiritual passion that comes from being connected to something greater than ourselves, something that has a transcendent quality to it, that gives life unswerving purpose and that connects us to a group of people stretching centuries into the past and into a world that exists beyond death.

There are, I'm sure, many other motivating factors that lead individuals to embrace fundamentalist religious expression – personal, psychological and spiritual factors, as well, sometimes, as coercion and manipulation.

The point I'm trying to make here is that, despite the few who tarnish the image of fundamentalist religion, especially now in human history, there is much that is appealing and comforting in fundamentalism to millions and millions of people, even if we ourselves cannot accept their system of belief.

Opposing the fundamentalist worldview, at the other end of the spectrum, is a growing chorus of atheist rejection of all forms of religious expression.

In the last couple of years we have seen numerous books, articles and TV programs attempting to debunk religion.

Richard Dawkins' "The God Delusion" became a best seller.

Popular French philosopher Michel Onfray's "The Atheist Manifesto" has had similar success.

The common theme of these authors and thinkers is that religion is an unmitigated disaster, a human fabrication that has caused vastly more harm than good and which is based on fantasy at best and cynical manipulation by religious leaders for political gain at worst - an opiate for the masses, a pious fraud.

And we must acknowledge that there is much to commend the strident voices of opposition to religion.

Careful research over the last few centuries by scholars of ancient literature, of archaeology and of history has uncovered clues that raise significant doubts about the historicity of many of the stories in The Bible.

The sciences of biology and astrophysics are in complete contradiction to a literal reading of the creation story as described in the Torah.

The very religious texts that underpin the great religions of the world are clearly the work of dedicated human authors, despite traditional beliefs about literal divine revelation.

All world religions are human developments, the responses of people to the miracle of living and the mystery of creation, ways of understanding the cosmos and our role in it.

And we must agree that looking at the history of the world, so much bloodshed can indeed be linked to violence in the name of religion. Our own Torah speaks of our ancestors mercilessly slaughtering the inhabitants of Canaan upon our entry into the Promised Land – all in God's name.

The slaughter of countless Jews and Muslims during the Crusades was done – in God's name.

And more recently we have seen the horrors of Islamist terrorism.

In the aftermath of the Holocaust so many of our own people gave up on any belief in God.

How could there be a God and an Auschwitz?
And if there is a God, what kind of God would allow an Auschwitz?

Indeed there is much to commend the growing voice of atheism out there in the world.

Yet, what about societies that reject religion?
How have they fared? Are they beacons of peace and hope and brotherly love?

Communism is avowedly atheistic, yet Stalin oversaw the murder of tens of millions of his own citizens.

China is about as anti-religious as you can get today, and that country is raping the environment, and supporting evil regimes abroad. And internally there are reports about shocking human rights abuses taking place all the time.

Perhaps worst of all is the allegation that Chinese officials are selectively killing those deemed to be 'Enemies of The State' to provide matches for people awaiting organ transplantation.

And what of meaning, purpose, community building, ethical values? How these vital elements of a full and healthy life and society emerge from the sterile laboratory of atheism is a great mystery to me.

In fact, in Michel Onfray's much lauded "The Atheist Manifesto", the great philosopher tells us at the beginning of the book that once he's finished debunking religion he'll provide a framework for an atheist alternative. Anyone who's read his book will know that he provides no such framework. I'd suggest that's because he can't.

Last year, one Friday afternoon, I received a call from the producer of John Faine's radio program on ABC 774. They were looking for a rabbi to join a priest and a Muslim cleric to discuss Michel Onfray's book.

With great foolhardiness I agreed, even though at that point I hadn't even heard of Michel Onfray.

I quickly went out to Borders and picked up a copy, which I read over the weekend.

On the morning of the broadcast I turned up at the ABC studios near Southbank and was informed that all the church groups had declined the invitation.

It would be me and a Muslim.

And the Muslim wasn't even a religious leader. He was a lawyer and political commentator who is frequently on TV and radio, Waleed Aly.

Being the first time I was going to be on a highly rating radio program I suddenly had the intense feeling that I was way out of my depth.

Nonetheless, it seemed too late to turn back and so I went ahead with it.

Before our segment, the host, Jon Faine, led in with the introduction in which he described me and Waleed as the “defenders of religion against the atheist onslaught”.

I can assure you that did not help me feel any better!

Faine opened with a soft ball question to me. Basically, he asked, what did I think of Onfray’s views?

My answer then and my answer now are exactly the same.

Michel Onfray and other Atheists like him make the classic mistake of throwing the proverbial baby out with the bathwater.

I can agree with much of Onfray’s critique of fundamentalist religion and classical religious beliefs but what he and others like him fail to understand is the deep abiding value, for individuals and societies, that exists in our religious traditions and the possibility of our religions to grow, to mature, to develop and to be a great force for good in our world.

And friends, this brings me to the point I’d like to make this Yom Kippur.

As we spend today contemplating our actions and our inactions over the last year, I’m going to suggest that we add to our alphabet of woes what I see as a growing sin in our community.

It’s a sin that I see playing out in all age groups.

It’s a sin that I see happening both in those who are actively involved in synagogue life here at TBI and those members who choose to keep their involvement sporadic.

It’s a sin that even I find myself being guilty of from time to time.

What is this sin?

I’m going to call it the sin of lacking pride in being a Progressive Jew.

It’s that subtle sense of embarrassment too many of us feel when we tell friends and family that we go to “the Temple”.

We’re either embarrassed because they are Orthodox and we feel that they are looking down on us,

or we’re embarrassed because our atheist friends or family don’t understand why we’d be involved in a synagogue at all.

It’s that subtle sense of embarrassment we feel when the conversation around the *Shabbes* table turns to the latest apparently crazy thing “the liberals” have done -

- first, decades ago it was the organ! “Oy vey, It’s like a church!”
- Then it was women rabbis! “What were they thinking?”
- And now they are doing commitment ceremonies for homosexuals! “What will be next, bacon and eggs on Yom Kippur?”

Yet, friends, in the face of fundamentalist religion and extreme atheism what the world needs now more than ever is a growing, vibrant and active middle ground.

More than ever we need a religious expression that combines tradition with modernity, the artfulness of religious sensitivity with the hard facts of science.

A religious expression that does not shy away from a critical analysis of our religious texts.

That looks for the spirit of the law not only the letter of the law, that searches for what Dennis Denuto, the lawyer in the movie "The Castle" calls "the Vibe".

That values learning from science, the humanities and even other religious traditions.

That lifts us to the spiritual realm without forcing us to keep our heads in the clouds.

As Jews by birth and by choice we stand in a line of tradition that goes back generations.

As we join together here on this Yom Kippur, the Sabbath of Sabbaths, we are side by side with all of them.

In the words of the passage of torah we just read (Deut 29:9-10) "*Atem Nitzavim hayom kulchem...*" you all stand here this day. "... *Me'chotev etz'echah ad sho'ev mei'mei'chah...*" – "from the woodchopper to the drawer of water" - midrashically understood to be from the beginning of Jewish time to the end.

From Abraham the first Jew to Elijah the Prophet heralding in the Messianic Age.

We are all an integral part of the ever growing, ever maturing tapestry of vibrant Jewish life.

We speak the language of Jewish religious discourse; we live the yearly and life cycles of Jewish time.

Yet we understand that our religion is one of many and that it has developed over time.

We know that we are unique in our unique religious worldview; in the founding myths that shape our values, in the characteristics we view in the divine and in ourselves. Yet we also know that other religious truths have value too.

In whatever we do, whether we are doctors, lawyers, teachers, consumer advocates, scientists, business people, mums, dads, seniors or young people, our Progressive Jewish worldview can and does help guide us - long after graduating from King David School, or completing our time with Netzer and certainly long after our bar and bat mitzvahs!

Every one of us here today had to make the choice to come here this Yom Kippur. Some of us come every year. Others of us come only from time to time.

Each of us could have chosen to spend today somewhere else – at work, at the beach, studying for exams, playing golf.

The fact is that most of us could have gone to any number of shuls – large or small; shuls without an organ; shuls without a mixed choir; shuls where women and men sit separately; shuls where gays might be welcomed but their relationships are condemned shuls where Jews married to non-Jews are ostracized and excluded from being given an *aliyah* to the torah.

But we are here.

We are here for a variety of reasons.

But we are all here as Jews, Progressive Jews.

And we ought to be proud that we are here, that we are bucking the dual trends – towards religious fundamentalism and towards unbridled atheism.

Friends, let's be proud as Progressive Jews that we give equal voice and involvement to men and women.

Let's be proud as Progressive Jews that our growing movement supports interfaith dialogue and inter-religious harmony.

Let's be proud as Progressive Jews that we focus our attention on Tikkun Olam – healing the world through social justice, and working to improve the environment.

Let's be proud as Progressive Jews that we seek to constantly engage with our tradition in light of the realities of the world around us and that we welcome all those who wish to make positive Jewish choices in their lives and the lives of their children.

Let's be proud as Progressive Jews that we don't have to leave our brains at the door when we come to shul and that we don't have to leave our souls at the shul when we step outside.

Yet, too often, as Progressive Jews we fail to feel pride and when we do feel pride too often we fail to share it.

We all know that probably the majority of Jews in Melbourne are "Orthodox" by name and family habit only.

Deep down in their minds and souls I know that they could be touched by the balance struck by Progressive Judaism.

I believe that if we all speak more about why we come to TBI, what we like about TBI, why we are proud to be connected with the King David School and to Netzer and millions of other likeminded Jews around the world, simply why we are proud to be Progressive Jews, many of them will join us.

And in this post September 11 age when fundamentalist religion and atheism are both on the rise, finding a spiritual home somewhere in between is just what we need and just what our world needs.

This Yom Kippur, let's all rekindle the pride we feel in our Progressive Judaism.
And in so doing may we enrich our lives and together help to move our world from where it is to where it ought to be.

Ken Yehi Ratzon. May this be God's will.

Suggestions for further reading and exploration:

<http://www.tbi.org.au/home/what-is-progressive-judaism/>

"Our Place in the World – thirty questions about Progressive Judaism" J S Levi. (Available free from the TBI office)

"Liberal Judaism" by Eugene Borowitz, UAHC Press, 1984

"One People, Two Worlds", Ammiel Hirsch and Yosef Reinman, Schoken Books, 2002

"Jewish Living", Mark Washofsky, UAHC Press, 2001

"Who Wrote the Bible?", Richard E Friedman, Harper Collins, 1997 edition.

"The Torah: A Modern Commentary, Revised Edition", URJ Press, 2005.

"The JPS Torah Commentary" – six volumes, including Haftarat, Jewish Publication Society.

"Bondage of the Mind", R. D. Gold, Aldus Books, 2008