

VOICES OF OUR LIVES

קולות חיינו
Kolot Chayeinu

VOICES

Winter 2011 • חורף 5771 www.kolotchayeinu.org

Doubt, Doubting, Doubtful

BY KATHRYN CONROY

Our Rebbitzin, Kathryn Conroy, coined the phrase, "Doubt can be an act of faith," which was then incorporated into our mission statement. When Kolot members first heard this phrase, we all instantly recognized the truth of it, but rarely discussed what it actually meant. In this issue of VOICES, we do.

When I was teaching at Columbia, I taught a course in clinical social work. One of the things I stressed was that to be an adult one had to be able to tolerate ambiguity and ambivalence. Being able to deal with ambiguity means coming to grips with the fact that most things are ambiguous, uncertain, not 100% clear or known. In order to function we all have to deal with not knowing and plunging ahead anyway: I don't know how the DVD player works or what makes the microwave cook but I use both. I don't know what causes most serious illness or when I will die, but I live fully everyday until then. If I waited for absolute, comprehensive knowledge or certainty I would be immobilized.

Ambivalence means having two diametrically opposed feelings about the same thing. For example: I hate my job because I have to get up early and ride the crowded subway to get there. And, I love my job because of the people I work with and the fact that I think I am making a difference. Two totally opposite feelings about the same thing: love and hate for the job. If we are honest with ourselves we know that we

feel that way about most people, too. I love the fact that someone (parent, child, friend, partner, spouse, etc.) loves me. I hate the fact that they make demands. I love that they are generous and well meaning; I hate that they chew with their mouth open. It actually doesn't take much to spark ambivalence in us.

So it is, for me, with God. I have to deal with both ambiguity and ambivalence just

ambiguity and ambivalence. Toward what? I don't know! And that's fine. It is what it is. Some days there is a glimmer that of course there is a God. Some days, not. Doubt is not clinging to either position; I doubt them both. Doubt reinforces for me that I am an adult in this struggle about/if/what God. As this adult, I can live ethically and compassionately without requiring of myself absolute, blind belief in something. And doubt is my act of faith that it is possible.

Why would I suggest "Doubt is an act of faith" for Kolot? Because Kolot is a community built on diversity of every kind including opinions and beliefs. No fixed belief sys-

Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives is a Jewish congregation in Brooklyn, where doubt can be an act of faith and all hands are needed to build our community.

-from the Kolot Chayeinu Mission Statement

as I have to deal with both of those factors to be a fully functioning adult in my life. Ambiguity: is there a God? If so, what kind of God: personal or impersonal? Active or passive? A million questions and honestly, I have no answer. And how do I feel about that: pretty ambivalent!

Hence, the basis of this short essay: DOUBT! Doubt as an act of faith. Doubt is an action, it is an active engagement in something. I could simply disengage but I don't. I embrace the act of doubting because I have faith that it is worth it to struggle with the

tem of one size fits all leaves a huge amount of room for doubt. Kolot is made up of people who believe in God; who don't believe in God; who believe that God personally intervenes in their lives; who assume God completely ignores them; and everything in between. And no one is threatened by the others' dis/belief. The person who prays because they believe that God will personally make a difference in their daily life is not the least bit threatened by the person standing next to them who does not believe in God at all; they attend the same services and sing

*I don't know who God is exactly.
But I'll tell you this.
I was sitting in the river named Clarion, on a
water splashed stone
and all afternoon I listened to the voices
of the river talking.
Whenever the water struck the stone it had
something to say,
and the water itself, and even the mosses trailing
under the water.
And slowly, very slowly, it became clear to me
what they were saying.
Said the river: I am part of holiness.
And I too, said the stone. And I too, whispered
the moss beneath the water.*

From the beginning of a long poem by Mary Oliver titled
"At the River Clarion."

Dear Friends,

I start with it because even though our editor keeps asking me to write about doubt, I keep wanting to write about something else. The something else has something to do with doubt, though not perhaps in the way that made everyone laugh when I first repeated Kathryn's words ("Kolot, where doubt is an act of faith") during a Rosh HaShanah service. No, the doubt I see now at Kolot Chayeinu is more about doubting the potential for connection to any traditionally Jewish understanding of God. Yet while Kolot members in droves turn away from that God, they also express beautifully their spiritual experiences or, as I sometimes ask, "tell me about the God you don't believe in."

They just doubt that Judaism as they – you? – were taught it early in life has anything to say to them now, as modern Americans, Brooklynites, mostly, dealing with work (or not), children (or not), love (or not), and yearning – always yearning for an answer or at least a place to rest.

Mary Oliver writes, "Said the river: imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going." I can't think of a better description of God, yet people are constantly amazed to think that the Jewish God, the "old man saying no," as Roger Kamantz reported in *The Jew and the Lotus*, could be

seen this way. No one ever taught them to imagine, or think deeply about God's many names, or about mystical experience that is the Jewish equivalent of other mystical traditions. Former Kolot president Lisa Zbar wrote recently, "*I learned that our tradition has sources, dating back hundreds of years, on how to pray, meditate, become more mindful and live a joyous life, even in the face of pain. I was flabbergasted that no one had ever told me about these texts and tools.*"



Tell me about
the God
you don't
believe in



Flabbergasted quickly becomes doubt if the answers one yearns for are not forthcoming. A student of Rabbi Sue Oren's encountered Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) for the first



Photo courtesy of Eileen Lippman

time in her class and said, "Why didn't anyone tell me about this before?!!!"

How can you think there is a God that cares about you when that caring is never made clear, when life is painful or problematic or dull, and religion is just that old set of rules that have nothing to do with you? I'd be doubtful at best.

And of course as one wag once said, we Jews are the people who believe in at most one God. We have always been doubtful, and funny in our doubt. And cynical. And still yearning.

Many years ago, a colleague of mine was a child in a Hebrew school where the rabbi was Arnold Jacob Wolf, z"l, one of the greats, a scholar and social activist. The child said, in response to a question from Wolf, "I don't believe in God" (very proudly, the way so many Kolot Chayeinu students say the same thing now). Wolf's response? "What makes you think it matters to God?"

It is funny, and provocative. But I hope it does matter to God that so many people readily proclaim their lack of belief. And it matters to me. In truth, I do not particularly care if you believe in God or not. What I do care about is that you have room in your heart or soul or mind to "imagine everything you can imagine, then keep on going." If you can't, I am doubtful that God or prayer or Jewish learning can ever enter your heart or soul. How could it?

The Zohar teaches us a marvelous lesson: It looks at the beginning of Torah, the first line of the story of life, "Bereishit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v'et-ha-arets. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." But the syntax is odd. So the Zohar reads the first half of the line, "In the begin-

continued on page 14



MISSION STATEMENT

Kolot Chayeinu/Voices of Our Lives is a Jewish congregation in Brooklyn, where doubt can be an act of faith and all hands are needed to build our community. We are creative, serious seekers who pray joyfully, wrestle with tradition, pursue justice and refuse to be satisfied with the world as it is. As individuals of varying sexual orientations, gender identities, races, family arrangements, and Jewish identities and backgrounds, we share a commitment to the search for meaningful expressions of our Judaism in today’s uncertain world.

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IN THIS ISSUE

Doubt, Doubting, Doubtful by Kathryn Conroy	1
Letter from the Rabbi by Rabbi Ellen Lippmann	2
The Elephant by Scott Fox	4
Chai Time	5
Light Beyond Darkness by Nancy Workman	6
Come as You Are by Michael Hopkins	7
A Fierce Mystery by Trisha Arlin	8
Smashing Idols and the Mess that Ensues by Raul Rothblatt	10
What We Don’t Understand by Arthur Goldwag	11
Faith in What? by Susan Hamovitch	12
Allowed to Hover by David Barthold	13
A Doubter’s Voice by Maya Bernstein-Schalet	15

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The Elephant

BY SCOTT FOX

I'd like to talk about what I feel is often an elephant in the room: God.

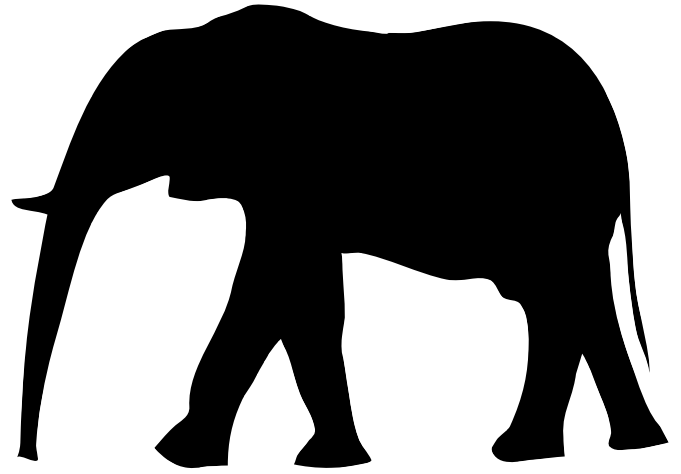
I spent this summer with a group of non-Jews: priests, ministers, even a messianic Jew - counseling people in a hospital in Brooklyn. Often our conversations about how to help patients shifted into deep discussions about God. Most of the Christians with whom I worked believe in a personal God - no doubt about it. Their God hears their prayers, and rewards and punishes them based on their good and bad deeds. Throughout the summer, I evaded the theological implications of the questions my non-Jewish fellow clergymembers asked about God, by simply answering, "We Jews don't believe that."

But what do "we Jews" believe? I'd like to take a look at this question using one of the most central theological treatises in Judaism: the Shema.

In the second paragraph of the Shema (controversially not in the Reform *Mishkan Tefillah*), page 30 in the *Sim Shalom* prayerbook, we read, "If you will earnestly heed the mitzvot that I command you on this day... then I will favor your land with rain at the proper season...and you will have an ample harvest of grain, wine and oil." This prayer presents an image of a God of divine retribution who does good things for us when we follow the mitzvot and bad things when we do not. But what about when bad things happen to a good person? Does that mean that the person was not following the mitzvot? Why would God have everyone follow these specific mitzvot and not other ones? Why would God give us mitzvot that God knows we cannot follow now, like bringing sacrifices to the Holy Temple?

Do many of us, as progressive Jews, believe instead in a God that we describe in a different way - the God in whom Spinoza and Heschel believed? This God is every part of everything in the world. That means that your shirt, the concrete sidewalk, the theory of relativity and every page of Harry Potter are divine. The goal then, is simply to see the Godliness in every single thing and every single minute of this world. Again, this God can be found in the Shema, page 154 in *Mishkan Tefillah*, "You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

Is this the God that we believe in? Or do we believe in a third way of thinking about God, the God of Mordechai Kaplan, a great teacher and figure of The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, and founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. This is a God of nature. This God is the wind that blows the trees, the force that gives flowers their stocks and leaves and colorful pedals. This God is the process that changes the seasons and rolls the stars out before the night sky, as we read on page 148 leading up to the Shema, "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the universe, who speaks evening into being, skillfully opens the gates, thoughtfully alters the time and changes the seasons, and arranges the stars in their heav-



Which theology is right? Which one is Jewish? The comforting Shechinah that I felt this past summer? Kaplan's natural God, because I can see it? Spinoza's awesome God of all things, because I can know it? Our traditional God, because it is written in our Bible?

This reminds me of a children's story about, of all things, an elephant. In this story, four children are blindfolded and told to explain the elephant using only their hands. The first child holds onto the elephant's leg and describes the elephant as wide and round. The second child holding the trunk of the elephant says that the elephant is round all right but hardly wide, and it has a flat part at the end. The third at the tail of the elephant agrees that it's not wide but can't find the flat part of the elephant. The fourth thinks they're all totally off. He's at the side of the elephant, and insists that the elephant isn't round at all, but rough and flat.

This story illustrates how different people can see God in different ways. It seems to me that all the ways are God - God in the middle of the Shema: Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. "Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One."

In the end I told the other chaplains with whom I was working, who were not Jewish, about the Jewish struggle with God. We Jews get our name Israel from Jacob's transformative moment wrestling with an angel. We struggle with God and our God concepts - It's simply what we do.

I hope that, in the year to come, that we all experience parts of the many different ways to see God: the powerful God of our tradition, the awesome God of Spinoza and Heschel, the beautiful God of Kaplan and the comforting God of the Shechinah. ■

But what do 'we
Jews' believe?

enly courses according to plan. You are Creator of day and night, rolling light away from darkness and darkness from light."

Or do we believe in a different, fourth way of seeing God that I know that I encountered this summer. A God of presence: the Shechinah. When patients in the hospital asked for me to pray for them, I did. I asked God to bring comfort and healing, and to anoint the patient with God's healing presence. I felt it, and I believed that. This too we have in our prayerbook: Page 160 in *Mishkan Tefillah*, directly after the Shema, "Spread over us the shelter of Your peace, guide us with Your good counsel... be our help."

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VOICES OF OUR LIVES



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At The
**BROOKLYN CHILDREN'S
MUSEUM**



Light Beyond Darkness

BY NANCY WORKMAN

I remember the day that a beautiful beam of sunlight, streaming down from behind a cloud, transformed me. On June 5, 1975, as I walked my dog near the Hudson River, a feeling of hope and warmth washed over me. In that moment, I thought that I understood “faith.” Perhaps that deep sense of expansion, wonder and comfort could help reset my spiritual foundation.

Before then, I felt terror. At age 15, ran-



I worried that I fell
short of some
divine mark.



dom pieces of dreams and thoughts seemed to be extending into my everyday reality. Trivial as they appeared – at one time, a student in my high school whom I rarely saw showed up in the same outfit that she had worn in my dream on the previous night--they nevertheless signaled to me the frightening possibility of supernatural forces trying to tell me something dire. Some of the adolescents whom I meet today describe similar phenomena--dreams and other perceptual experiences that materialize in unexpected ways. Even at the time, I realized that these potential extrasensory events could yield a range of explanations, from the sublime to the ordinary. But despite my efforts to either view them as other forms of energy, or to dismiss them entirely, a sick sense of doom set in. If the universe were more purposeful, maybe some deity was keeping tabs. I could be in big trouble.

My pessimistic side battled with the parts of me that felt more open, trusting and curious. I worried that I should find “religion” just in case, and started looking into

theology. I obsessed about the meaning of life. But I also strove to remain authentic and spontaneous, at least as I understood these qualities. As a child in a non-religious family, I had wondered about God, the afterlife, and about whether miracles could happen. I think my father was turned off by his sense of hypocrisy in organized religion, likely heightened by a difficult upbringing that had plunged him and his siblings into foster care with the Jewish Child Care Association. I remember an off-hand remark that he once made, about how nice it would feel to believe in a being who loved everyone. But the Holocaust, McCarthyism, the Vietnam War and racial segregation had all further eroded any such possibility for him, and religious faith likely felt too risky. My mother, meanwhile, took a more casual and non-committal approach. With strong family ties to Jewish history and tradition, she seemed more connected to a Jewish cultural identity than to theology. Both of my parents exhibited tolerance, a strong sense of social justice, and optimism, all without apparent religious faith.

Even as a child, I was ashamed of my anxieties. Fearful of judgment and punishment in the afterlife and spooked by the supernatural, I figured that if “religion” were true (and if so, how to choose which one?), I could be in for it. Despite my overall compliance with rules as well as tendencies toward kindness and compassion, I worried that I fell short of some divine mark. I admired the seemingly carefree people in my life, who brought humor, spontaneity and joie de vivre to their day-to-day interactions. I trusted their motivations, and wished that I could be more irreverent and less scared. (As Joni Mitchell sang, “I’m frightened by the devil, and I’m drawn to those ones that ain’t afraid.”)

So it would seem that that ray of sunshine on a late spring afternoon in the mid-1970s – with a small dog and big river close by--symbolized my encounter with hope, faith and great relief: the gift of light beyond darkness. The familiar scene of sun and clouds took on a new meaning and I marveled at the wonder of possibility rather than limits, of love and forgiveness greater than



At first glance,
my doubt feels
ever-present, and
faith more fleeting.



punishment. Rabbi Lippmann has spoken about “leaning back into God,” a sentiment which calls to mind a similar sensation. I relaxed, I laughed, and I discovered my appetite again, at least in fleeting moments. But still, the doubts persisted at many other times, in ways that left me fearful that I still could not get it right, and that even my anxieties might seem disrespectful in a universe filled with beauty and mysticism. Would I get punished for not sitting back far enough in the spiritual lounge chair?

Now decades later I enter the Kolot community with yearnings and questions, whose resemblance to the elemental uncertainties of my childhood may belie all of the seemingly more sophisticated exploration over the intervening years. Like a child, I return readily to a stage similar to Erik Erikson’s description of the infantile period of “trust versus mistrust” in my excursions into faith and doubt. But now an adult, I would like to think I better understand nuance and duality. Somewhere along the way (did my prefrontal cortex mature? my paranoia go into remission? or did a spiritual window open?), I formed an alliance with anxiety. Balancing spontaneity and attempts at emotional honesty on the one hand, while still maintaining awe and downright fear on the other--these seemingly Jewish and spiritual values play an essential role. Someone once said to me that it would take “a high person indeed” to fear God. Although I could strongly argue to the contrary, sometimes I also see it now. The quest to connect with something both greater and deeper can allow for far-reaching anxiety. It may not always be time to lean back and exhale, even though this act likely requires the most profound spirituality and faith possible at challenging moments.

continued on page 14

Come As You Are

BY MICHAEL HOPKINS

I have often said the tagline for Kolot, should be “just come as you are!” That is what I did. I found Kolot after I had moved to the area after having lived in Northern New Jersey for the past 11 years. My 24-year marriage had ended in divorce and I had just found a two-bedroom apartment on Craigslist here in Park Slope. For 30 plus years, I was a Jewish Community Center, or JCC, executive and I was starting the next chapter of my life as a single gay man with two adult children.

Belonging to a synagogue had always been an important part of my life and I knew I needed to find a place that spoke to me religiously and spiritually and had that feeling of community. So I went shopping...on the Internet. I “googled” the words “park slope synagogue” and 10 different synagogues came up. I then went to each synagogue’s website and read about their congregation. I remember reading Kolot’s mission statement and I thought, wow, doubt is an act of faith; pray joyfully, varying family arrangements and an uncertain world. How do they know me so well already. This place has my name on it!

From my very first Shabbat where everyone could not have been more welcoming, to Shabbat services, the membership committee and recently tabling all day at Brooklyn Pride telling Kolot’s story to anyone who would listen, I found a home.

I occasionally attend services at other synagogues, but I belong to Kolot because I wanted to be part of a synagogue that welcomes everyone: straight, gay, with children and without, young and old, and rich and poor. What we all have in common is our Jewish journey...one that has more questions than answers and one that celebrates difference.

Many of us think, “I will join a synagogue when my children enter first grade or before



Simchat Torah.



I belong to Kolot
because I wanted
to be part of a
synagogue that
welcomes everyone



they are ready for bar or bar mitzvah,” or, “I don’t need to join because I do not have children.” In truth, one never knows when you need a supportive community or compassionate rabbi. This past January 23rd I was at Kolot for Shabbat services and afterwards, a small group of us were deciding where we were going to go out for lunch. I looked at my phone and saw a number of text messages and missed calls. Within minutes I learned that my sister’s son, my 22-year old nephew, Jeremy Kane, was killed in Afghanistan. Within minutes, I was reminded why I belong here. Kolot Chayeinu was there for me then and continues to be an important part of my life.

May this year 5771 be a year when all of us are blessed with the love of our family and friends and may it be a year in which doubt and hope can live side by side. ■

אמונה

A Fierce Mystery

BY TRISHA ARLIN

“Between the God of the universe and the God of a tribe, between inclusion and exclusion, between the imperative of liberty and the imperative of law, explodes Moses. What we know about him is exactly nothing, exactly everything, he is a fierce mystery.”

-- Alicia Ostriker,

THE NAKEDNESS OF THE FATHERS

When the Kolot Chayenu mission statement first came out, I thought that “doubt can be an act of faith” meant either, oh goody, I can *not* believe in God and still join a Jewish community, or, oh fantastic, Kolot is all about truth to power and challenging Pharaoh, or, oh wow, I can join in this place without checking my brains at the door. This is all true, and this is also very limiting.

The God I didn't believe was a child's God, learned in a Conservative suburban “temple” of the fifties and sixties that wouldn't let me, as a girl, have an aliyah, wear a tallit or chant Torah, and which discouraged complexity, at least in its young people. I was right to not believe in that God, but it also never occurred to me that there was an alternative. My Jewish education at my tedious and soul-destroying Hebrew School was so poor that I had no knowledge of or access to the thousands of years of rigorous study of Jewish texts and customs. So I thought being religious, which for me meant being Jewish, was always going to be just as tedious and soul-destroying as that Hebrew School.

I was disappointed in that God and that Judaism but I was (and am) a contrary sort so, if only to piss off the powers-that-were, I demanded alternatives. No answers were forthcoming and I didn't actually expect them. It never actually occurred to me that there actually might be a Judaism that rewarded someone like me whose main talent was an ability to ask the next logical question.

Think about the “god” you don't believe in. Is it that you don't believe in God or is it that you are stuck on one particular name, one particular metaphor that doesn't name your experience of God? Might there be a different metaphor, another name that opens up the possibility of encounter with a power grander than yourself, with a web that can connect every person to every other person?

—Rabbi Laura Geller

Then I grew up and asked, what could God mean if I made the same kind of demands of God-ness that I made of anything else? What if truth to power doesn't just mean truth to the powerful but means truth is power? What does that demand of me? And what the heck is in all those books written in Hebrew and Aramaic? I began to study. Now, with my teensy bit of Jewish knowledge, I try to reconcile the ancient with the modern, I attempt to interpret laws, ethics and stories that come from a culture that shares almost no references or paradigms with the culture I live in and I look for a linear rationality in a people's creation myth that was never meant to be linear or rational. I accept that I am a religious person, whatever that means, with a desire for faith as strong as my need for doubt.

So, what is to be done? How do I reconcile my doubt with my religiosity? Thus far I have found five possible strategies:

1. Scoff at the contradictions and walk away from the whole thing.

I was fourteen when I invented atheism.

2. Live with inconsistency.

I used to think that the only way to have intellectual integrity was through consistency. I thought that if God as I was taught God as a child was nonsensical, then I had to reject everything else that came along with that

God. So at the very beginning

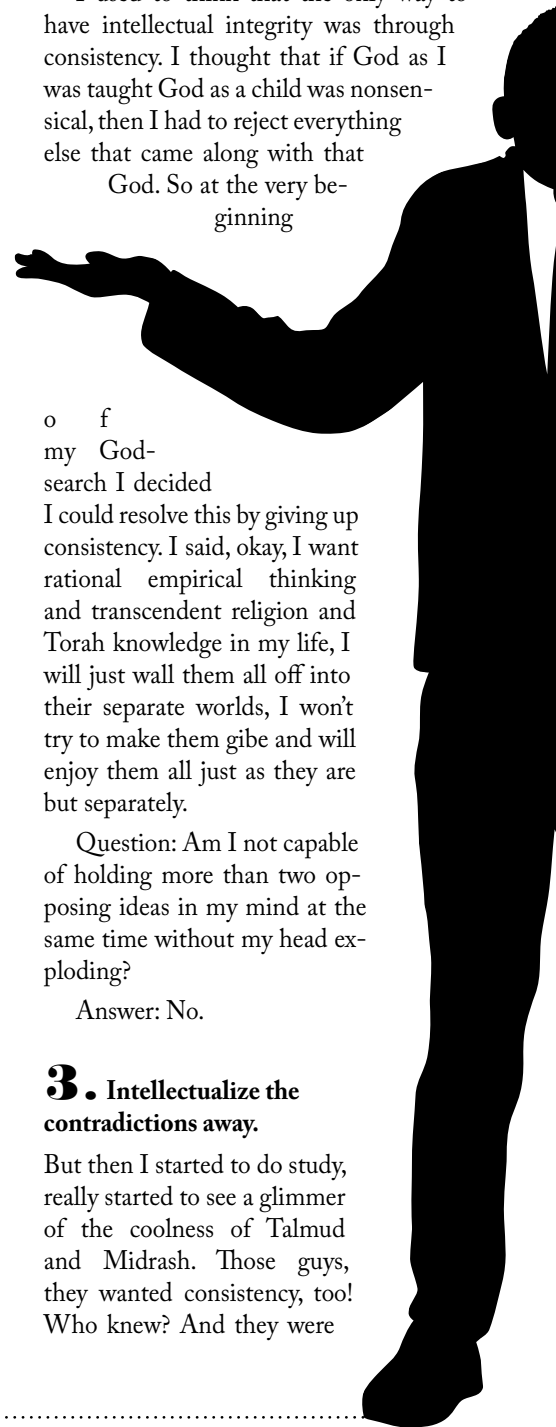
o f
my God-
search I decided
I could resolve this by giving up consistency. I said, okay, I want rational empirical thinking and transcendent religion and Torah knowledge in my life, I will just wall them all off into their separate worlds, I won't try to make them gibe and will enjoy them all just as they are but separately.

Question: Am I not capable of holding more than two opposing ideas in my mind at the same time without my head exploding?

Answer: No.

3. Intellectualize the contradictions away.

But then I started to do study, really started to see a glimmer of the coolness of Talmud and Midrash. Those guys, they wanted consistency, too! Who knew? And they were



gonna make it work, no matter how tortured the logic got, reasoning their way through all the permutations until they came up with rationales for why the Torah is sometimes inconsistent, nutty and/or creepy. Much of their work is brilliant, some of it is kind of sad and ridiculous but dazzling nonetheless. I love this stuff. I've barely dipped my toe into how the rabbis and scholars have worked to understand the anomalies, or as Larry Kushner calls it, the "not fitting of ideas", but it's fascinating and deep. I'd happily spend the rest of my life learning this cumulative and associative way of thinking. But it easily becomes nothing more than a mind game, thrilling but devoid of emotion.

4. Use transcendence and feelings to understand intuitively.

Mi-
drashic
and folk stories can be the Jewish equivalents of the Zen koan, the sound of one scroll clapping, more or less, and they make intuitive sense that isn't dependent on logic. Music and poems describe basic human needs and feelings and perceptions within the framework of Jewish thought. They sound right and feel good, capturing the essence of what we know to be true, bypassing the logical next questions by going straight for the heart. Jewish meditation unlocks a spirituality that is Jewish but also universal. All of this is a very acceptable strategy for assimilating basic Jewish values, culture and Godness and works for many of us a lot of the time. But too much intuition without enough rational judgment leads to sloppy thinking and precisely the kind of faith I don't want.

5. There are no contradictions or inconsistencies.

Clearly what I need to do is to tolerate, intellectualize and intuit the contradictions all at the same time, if possible, and even run away from them when it's necessary. When this approach is even remotely successful, I then begin to glimpse the possibility that there are actually no contradictions to reconcile. I begin to see that it's all a part of a larger understanding of connection and learning and yearning, that it's okay if I can't always see those connections. I can just let them be there and if at some point I manage to put it together (unlikely, but you never know) that will be great and if not, that's fine, too.

In other words, I begin to have faith that it all makes a kind of sense, even if I cannot and will never perceive it. Gosh.

"...the sign of wonder can only impress the one who is psychologically prepared to be convinced."

- Neshama Leibowitz

Each approach is just one aspect of a mindful Jewish life. God's presence, for me, is in the questions not the answers, and in the arguments not the resolutions. This is truly doubt as an act of faith. What a fine life that could be, to scoff, ignore, intellectualize, poeticize and accept it all and live within the connections and contradictions, whether I call that God (however I understand that at any given moment) or not, to give oneself permission to live within the fierce mystery.

Blessed HaMavdeel, that which
Divides Time

And separates the whole into increments
that we may comprehend it,

Blessed Adonai Echad, that which Unites
All Existence

And connects us that we may be one,

Blessed Ruach HaOlam, that which Cannot
Be Known

And provides us with so many questions:

Thanks for being so interesting.

Amen. ■

If we do not have the faith that God
creates anew each day,
prayer becomes an old, unwanted habit.
How difficult it is to say the same words
day after day!
Thus scripture says,
"Cast us not into old age"—
may the word never become old for us.

- Degel Mechane Ephraim

Smashing Idols and the Mess that Ensues

BY RAUL ROTHBLATT

Of course doubt is the opposite of faith... or so it seems to most people.

Somehow I thought it would be easy writing about “doubt as an act of faith.” On second thought it seems like such a stretch. Is this just some sort of exercise of a non-conformist synagogue just trying to be contrarian? Many (most?) people would reject the whole idea immediately.

It was only after hashing the idea around that I realized that doubt is central to most of the Jewish stories that I love. As a teenager, the thing that I liked most about the Bible was the flaws of our heroes. We Jews are human, and we can do great things, even if we're not perfect.

For me, the image of Abraham smashing idols is an important founding myth of our ancient religion. As Rabbi Andy Bachman wrote in “Social Action Within Our Walls: Smashing Jewish Idols:”

Whether our actions motivate us to work for labor and the downtrodden or peace in Israel, we activate a certain “Abraham” within to destroy the idols of prior perspectives and belief systems, and replace them with a new perspective that sheds light upon and brings us nearer to God’s vision for all humankind.

This quote brings me to a second metaphor that is essential to my connection to Judaism: Tikkun Olam or repairing the world. I am moved by the vision that the world was somehow shattered and that it is our job – my job – to put things back in their proper place. That means looking at everything and asking, is this the way it should be?

This is the essence of striving, which is not exactly the same as doubt. In fact, everything I say should be qualified with some self-doubt. The first Biblical story that comes to mind when thinking about doubt is Jacob wrestling with angels. Whenever I have any sort of question about Judaism, the first person I call is my father. He points out that this part of Jacob’s story gets too much attention, that a lot of Reform Jews like to quote it a bit too often at the expense of hundreds of other, and that it is a “murky

story whose possible meanings must have been irretrievably lost.”

The Abraham story is from the midrash, not the Torah. In the Torah, Jacob earns the name Israel by wrestling with angels (Genesis 32:25-29):



It’s disorder that
can bring me closer
to someone I didn’t
know.



When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he touched his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day has broken.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go unless you bless me.” And he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then he said, “Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed.” Then Jacob asked him, “Please tell me your name.” But he said, “Why is it that you ask my name?” And there he blessed him.

After a few phone and email exchanges with my Dad, he does agree that doubt and faith can co-exist. This quote from Genesis helped win him over, though it is a little unsettling for me. The name “Israel” is not only associated with striving, and also with prevailing against men. That doesn’t sound like a warm, cuddly version of Judaism.

So the Jacob/Israel story can be read in different ways, but isn’t that a good thing?

It might be nice to be the final arbiter of the meaning of Judaism, but we’ve always been a people of many tribes. I hope we don’t idolize our own doubts and biases to think that we have a monopoly on Judaism.

Kolot is great at discussing, analyzing, debating, doubting and celebrating so many aspects of Judaism – really great. Maybe someday we’ll even figure out what prayerbook to use or what denomination we belong to.

I have to go further and plead for more doubt of our social attitudes. Our country’s political discourse is so full of venom, I do urge everyone to respect the humanity of our opposition. It’s easy to see that the opposing sides, whether Republican versus Democrats or pro- versus anti-bike lane people, paint the other side as completely motivated by selfishness and spite. Aren’t we idolizing our own views by completely dismissing the other side? Can we find a transformative, uplifting compassion by seeing the other side as human and flawed, just as we are?

I would like to end with some sort of big flourish... but this an article about doubt, so it seems wrong to end with some easy, pat answer. Since I’m writing from a personal perspective, I have to admit that it’s my personal proclivity to celebrate contradictions. I can celebrate G-d’s creations and still see the flaws of the world. The mistakes are usually the most fascinating parts.

The Kabbala has delved into this so beautifully and richly. According to the Zoharic tradition (via shma.com), restoration of the broken world “was entrusted to the hands and mind of human beings,” as opposed to G-d. Shma.com continues “contracted ‘Himself into Himself’ in order to leave ‘an unoccupied space’ within which the creative process could begin.”

Musical analogies are more meaningful for me. I really pay attention, and my heart really opens up, when a singer completely screws up. It’s when a stage performance or a religious ceremony falls apart that my heart really opens up for the souls struggling in front of their audience. This is when I feel like I have to really pay attention, because somehow that will help the person strug-

continued on page 14

What We Don't Understand

BY ARTHUR GOLDWAG

Jews are usually categorized under the three broad rubrics of Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform, but there is no shortage of discord within each movement – and in America, which has the world's largest Jewish population, at least a third of us don't practice at all. According to one recent survey, slightly more than half of us don't believe in God, either.

Zionism used to be an umbrella under which almost every Jew could gather, but that is rapidly changing – more and more, it is a wedge that divides us, not just from a hostile world but from each other. Israel's Rabbinate would probably certify me as a Jew, but not my children. But what parent would want to belong to a club that black-balls their own flesh and blood? And what is a Jew, anyway? What is it that we all believe?

Those questions could have just as easily been asked a thousand years ago.

I have been reading about the tenth century Karaite sage Jacob al Kirkisani (Karaites, Judaism's Biblical literalists, don't ascribe authority to the Talmud), who wrote a treatise called "The Book of Lights and the High Beacons." Twenty-five of its chapters dealt with the history of dissent within Judaism.

Among the dozens of personages and movements he described were the Biblical revolutionary Jeroboam, and the Second Temple Sadducees and Pharisees. In post-exilic times there were the rival rabbinical schools of Hillel and Shammai, the Isunians (who believed their leader Ovadiah was a prophet) and the followers of Ovadiah's student and successor Yugdan, who accepted Jesus and Mohammed as prophets, celebrated Shabbat on Wednesday, and believed that their leader was the Messiah. A latter day al-Kirkisani could write volumes about the millennium of Jewish dissent that followed – the rise of Kabbalah and the messianic apocalypticism of Sabbatai Zevi, the contention between the Hasids and the Mitnagdim, and the advent of the Haskalah, or Jewish Enlightenment.



Purim

God, to me, is
what we *don't*
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which surpasses all
understanding.

I don't have ready answers for any of those big questions, but I will say this. To me, the blind certitude of faith seems oddly incommensurate with the infinitude of God. God, to me, is what we don't understand – that which surpasses all understanding. And doubt is what makes us smarter. We can't learn unless we persist in asking questions,

even after the authorities have given us all of their answers. We can't have science unless we submit even that which we are sure we know to tests.

Doubters and questioners can be annoying, but they are seldom boring. I am proud to descend from a line of people who, for four thousand years, have never stopped bickering about the meaning of Jewishness – and just about everything else. Jews are like the couple who only stays married because they can't agree on the terms of their divorce. Better than the mindless unanimity of a cult; the lockstep conformity of born followers. Like the proverb says, "the believer is happy, the doubter is wise."

We Jews have always been more stiff-necked than steadfast; it's our saving grace. Certainty leads to stasis; a restless contrarianism to change and growth. We're not the only skeptics who have ever lived – but I submit that we've lived as long as we have because, like the Kolot mission statement puts it, "we believe in free expression of doubt and regular questioning."

Like Jacob, we wrestle with the divine. Even if some of us insist on calling it something else. ■

Faith in What?

BY SUSAN HAMOVITCH

According to the Merriam-Webster definition, faith is: *Belief and trust in and loyalty to God.*

God. Isn't that what faith is all about? And if it is, what do you write about if you don't believe in God? Or to put another way, does faith exist if it's not in something transcendent and unprovable? This would seem to be conundrum of anyone who does not have a fix on a transcendent 'something.' But professing faith in a solemn, invisible 'thing,' which is what the conventional, or received idea of 'God' seems to be can seem to lead to so many blind alleys – like wars that go on for three thousand-years – and so I prefer deliberately to just not deal with that definition. I run from it, in fact, like the plague. Faith doesn't exist without doubt, of course. They're as close to the notion of two sides of the same coin as you can get. And my doubt, when it comes to a transcendent being, overwhelms any semblance of faith. But, there is a but. There's something unprovable, unnamable, invisible that moves me when I participate in a service and congregate with fellow Jews. What is that something? Is there a kernel of "faith?" in that act? Where does this kernel derive from?

An anonymous writer observed that you can get a grasp of what you think by observing what you do. Just watch yourself, that's how you'll get to know yourself, this sage wrote. I've noticed that I and so many others are moved to stand together with other Jews and – daven. I don't think you examine faith, in other words, without landing somewhere in the vicinity of ... prayer.

Whether on the High Holy Days, or any Saturday of the year, any of these days does just fine to reveal the intangible, immeasurable, and very real yoke that unites us. And what we do is so simple, and ultimately mysterious. We come together on one of these days and pick up a prayer book and, together, we read from it. Singing, finding the tune, that I know contains an ancient theme, and matching my pace and my pitch with the rest of the congregation, this is what I and everyone there does, um, religiously. Is this an act of faith? I suspect it is.

I think it's the idea that we are somehow

synching with our ancestors, our origins (and let's not examine too closely what these might be.) And our origins are nicely laid out for us in that wonderfully human, and disturbing book that we all turn to later in the services. And when we do finally turn to the Torah, faith borders on pride. That's my people, who did and thought and wrote all these things! They're family! And they're mythic, and wonderful (even when they're terrible).

Faith borders on maintenance. We keep taking down the scrolls, marching down the aisles with them, and tapping them with the *siddurs* just to maintain those traditions, to "honor" our ancestors.

But there's something more to it too, an unnamable feeling that goes with the chanting, singing, marching, and tapping. There must be a Hebrew word for it – that ball of wax that holds within it belonging, real and



God. Isn't that what
faith is all about?



fantasized history, made-up stories, sound, rhythm, and language.... We imbibe it all, using something like – and I'm inventing this right now – a faculty of faith, leading us towards a belief in our worthiness as a people.

But, sorry, that's not enough. Liking ourselves is a start, but it can't be the whole thing – not when "the chosen people" idea is suspect, and anyway, when words like interfaith, tolerance and diversity are part of the fabric of our country and which undergird some of our prime, motivating ideals as a congregation. So, I look for something else that not only binds us but seems to be an unspoken imperative and I'm pretty sure I find it. It's not one of the 613 mitzvot, but it seems to be perhaps the 614th, possibly more of a primary injunction for we Jews of Kolot than any single rule. (I don't see us as a congregation of rule-bound members anyway) But what we do is – we argue. We do it politely for the most part, we do it often laughing but we do it continually, and with



Dancing on Eighth Avenue on Simchat Torah

relish – in d'var Torah, Shabbat services, our maggid's wonderful stories and *especially* when it's irreverent and racy, as at the High Holiday services. (I've heard some amazingly iconoclastic ideas coming from the bima, starting with how about we jettison the binding of Isaac story?)

But, arguing, or challenging the status quo, that's a very important thing to do. According to Stephen Hawking, it's an essential thing, this discussion, in order for the past to even exist. He writes "Physics tells us that objects exist in a suspended state until *observed...*" (italics my own. And though he most likely didn't have Jews arguing around the dinner table in mind when he wrote this, he could have.) No, I don't know exactly what this means, and I'm pretty sure that even most physicists have to take that idea "on faith." But cutting edge physics, if I'm reading Hawking correctly, is now that events in the past haven't happened until someone comes along and takes note.

The observation of something, in other words, makes it real. Good God! That means that if we don't bother to look at something, acknowledge it and try to understand it, it never happened at all!

Happy to say, Kolot members are generally very busy observing, taking note and

continued on facing page

Allowed To Hover

BY DAVID BARTHOLD

Doubt is an act of faith inasmuch as it expresses an ability to balance belief with reason. There are fewer things in this world more provocative than people who believe they are completely right, and there's seldom any lack of such right-minded people vying for our attention in the public sphere. The ability to appraise one's own conduct and beliefs, and to leave many things open to question, requires as much faith as does the ability to commit oneself completely to belief.

To my way of thinking, the question of God's nature or existence can only be settled by the individual. The great questions don't hinge on the existence of God, or the importance of organized religion. Faith is neither a necessary virtue, nor an evil. It can be used to justify massacres, as well as acts of transcendent generosity and compassion. It seems to

...the question of
God's nature or
existence can only
be settled by the
individual.

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sharing their observations with one another. And so, in a semblance of unity, and difference, we create events, insofar as we interpret them, and, though it's totally not mandatory, we also often act on them. The past and future come together in our sanctuary, where we stand together and take note of almost everything that's going on in our world.

It's a bit of collective wisdom that we Jews look at history – and current events – through the prism of our tragic, but communally rich, history. And we believe in the power of that past to shape an engagement with society that is ultimately wise. It's in that spirit that we pursue justice for domestic workers, or team up with other congregations to house a few homeless people in the dank and cold months, or most excitingly, travel to Israel and Palestine to listen, observe, look – and report back.

When Kolot's Israeli-Palestinian Reading Group discussed Avram Burg's book, *The Holocaust is Over: We must Rise from its Ashes*, some of us squirmed. Yet we considered the line of inquiry. Is the Holocaust always going to be the defining historical moment for the state of Israel? Burg asks. Even the Holocaust – its meaning for the present



Dancing on Eighth Avenue on Simchat Torah

– can be doubted, and revised. (I don't dare talk here about everything else in recent history we questioned, doubted, held up to the light for examination. But trust me, we left no stone unturned.)

me that religion, like many human enterprises, is essentially neutral, and that people come to religion looking for themselves and for each other as much as for God. The quality of human conduct is much more critical than the sincerity or depth of religious belief. The commandments and classic virtues that all religions invoke are good enough in themselves, and hard to attain, with or without belief.

My personal experience of religion has been largely positive. I grew up in a family that was culturally Christian, but not especially religious. In my mother's case, the strictness and even absurdity of her religious education made her reject religion as a young person. Among my family and friends, faith has been treated as a personal, and not a political or moral matter. Although I have no formal relationship with organized religion, I often find a great deal of meaning and solace in the services my family and I attend at Kolot. I appreciate being a member of a congregation that does not assume belief. As I see it, I'm allowed to hover at whatever place between doubt and faith I choose. ■

I'll end with another example where I felt the reverberation between ancient worlds, a deep and considered discussion about compelling modern events and, finally, an imperative to act. On an overcast day in June, I took the 2 train out to Sheepshead Bay, and spent the afternoon with the *Children of Abraham*. Quite a few Kolot members, along with members of Christian and Muslim congregations, walked a dozen blocks through this Brooklyn neighborhood in support of a proposed mosque, which the surrounding neighborhood vehemently opposed. Lawyers are challenging their right to build, the whole bit. And if that name – *Children of Abraham* – doesn't connote an extremely long, continuous thread connecting something that happened a million years ago, and maybe 60 years ago, to something that is demanded of us now...

In the end, I can sum up my sense of an invisible and intangible tie to a mythic people, which is as far as this skeptical doubting Jew can go, by saying that it felt absolutely right to be walking along, as a Jew, in support of that mosque. It – that feeling of rightness – I believe came out of a place prepared a mil-

continued on page 14

ning SOMETHING created Elohim/God.” And what is that something? Ain Sof – the name for the vast unending force of the universe, the “everything you can imagine and keep going.” The Zohar understands that this vast unnameable force is too big for us mere humans to wrap our minds around, so it created Elohim, a God we can deal with, can approach, can believe in, or not. But we need to know that behind this God is the unnameable “everything...”

Everything! Do you doubt it? So do I, often. As in times of stress or illness or death, especially, when there is no room for imagination or a sense of everything or any comfort, and the one you love dies in spite of all your prayers.

Mary Oliver writes, “If God exists he isn’t just butter and good luck. He’s also the tick that killed my wonderful dog Luke... He’s the ice caps that are dying... He’s the many desperate hands, cleaning and prepar-

ing their weapons... He’s every one of us, potentially. The leaf of grass, the genius, the politician, the poet. And if this isn’t true, isn’t it something very important?”

If God exists. Is that a statement of doubt or faith? The two are very close, which is how we get doubt as an act of faith. To get even to that “if” requires some opening, some stretching, some willingness to walk through a door into the unknown.

As Adrienne Rich has written, “The door itself makes no promises. It is only a door.”

And God is only God. Not a magician. Not a demon. Not the answers to all your yearning. Only a door. Or yes, a door! Or, do you see a door? Where’s the door?

Doubt away. What makes you think it matters to God?

In Hope,

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

LIGHT *continued from page 6*

So when I can, I use my fear--of lack of control, of judgment in the afterlife, and even of the existential opposite of religious angst--and hope that it can help bring me closer to something important.

Doubt has fueled understanding and faith. Uncomfortable as it may be, it spurs the feelings, fears and queries that seem to open up another level. Some research on religion and psychology supports the notion that people derive more positive benefits from beliefs that allow for flexibility and questioning, as compared to those involving more fundamentalist and rigid positions. I trust the honesty of doubt. Thus, when I saw that “doubt is an act of faith” in the Kolot mission statement, it struck a familiar chord and drew me in.

At first glance, my doubt feels ever-present, and faith more fleeting. Moreover, throughout my life, doubt has functioned in seemingly opposite ways. I started with fear that religion could be “true.” More recently, I have also worried that it can be “false.” Either way, the near-constancy of doubt, along with those precious feelings of faith, both

seem to spiral together into an unlikely yet inevitable dance, and I sense a wider reserve that sustains me. Sometimes only a sideways glimpse into the depths feels safest. At other times I just roll my eyes and hear the voices of mentors who reject such musings. I continue to value authenticity and irreverence.

So although I guess that the right answer on an imaginary test about faith and doubt involves the difference between doubt and apathy, frequently I continue to envy those who do not appear to seek transcendence in this way. For better or for worse, however, faith and doubt play major roles in my spiritual quest. At times I remain the guilty child, the terrified teenager, the embarrassed ruminator. But I would like to think that more often, I relax into the sweetness of faith on the one hand, while humbling myself to the mysteries and frightening possibilities on the other. I enjoy venturing around the edges of mysticism, while also poking fun at the whole enterprise. Doubt helps keep it real and meaningful. I am grateful to Kolot for its ongoing acknowledgment of these profound dualities. ■

the same songs, together. And each accepts the other without need to convince, and is probably open to discussing the other’s position because maybe, just maybe, each has something to learn from the other.

Doubt is an act of faith at Kolot because the community is adult enough to embrace a diversity of opinion about even the most heartrending topics. The community does not have one position or policy about what is acceptable, one statement of what is the “truth”. All opinions are acceptable, if not always comfortable. The only “rule” that I have experienced at Kolot is that one cannot oppress another. This tolerance for contrary opinions, for diversity of thought and belief, this acceptance of a range of feelings, this lack of certitude, is all based on the acceptance of doubt. And the acceptance of doubt is the fundamental, personally experienced, acknowledgement of ambiguity and ambivalence. ■

SMASHING *continued from page 10*

gling before their audience.

It’s disorder that can bring me closer to someone I didn’t know, whether it’s onstage or, say, in the subway. And it can also be the cosmic disorder that can bring me closer to G-d. If the Creator can screw up, then maybe there is a cosmic beauty in my mistakes.

I hope to celebrate G-d’s creations and flaws, hope to see compassion in the beauty and folly of my family and neighbors. I will strive to smash complacency in my ideas. Faith is not something cooked up by someone else and served on a plate: It is a constant struggle to improve oneself and the world through reflection, doubt, love and action. ■

FAITH *continued from page 13*

lennia ago by Jews arguing, seeking the high road, and making a collective decision to do something. I might even, grudgingly, let the idea of God enter my thoughts. It’s a possibility, I think, but only in this collective and historical and action-oriented sense (maybe the God in whom I have faith is a transitive verb?) that as a group ambling down the streets of Sheepshead Bay, we were “doing God’s work.” Doubt drowns out Faith when I write these words. But whether we were or not doesn’t really matter. We were doing the right thing. I have no doubt about that. ■

A Doubter's Voice

BY MAYA BERNSTEIN-SCHALET

This article is adapted from the drash delivered by Maya at her Bat Mitzvah at Kolot Chayeyinu on March 5, 2011.

The Torah portion I read today is P'kudei, the final Parshah from the book of Exodus, about the building of the tabernacle and all the necessary steps to make it holy. It includes rules, regulations, and many very specific instructions and lists. They had to create a lot so they used what they had and worked very hard.

I have worked very hard too, but I didn't know why I was doing this besides the fact that my parents wanted me to, and I still don't know my next steps in Judaism. But I did it. I learned, I practiced, I sang, I chanted, I read, I wrote. To succeed in becoming a Bat Mitzvah, I didn't/don't need to know what's coming next. And as for why—the starting why was a nudge from the parents, yes but that reason changed. I developed my own reason why. The process of becoming a Bat Mitzvah can't define itself before you have done it.

This experience has brought up doubts of my Jewish future, my belief in G-d, my ideas of community and spirituality, the truth in biblical stories, my ability to work towards something I don't quite see a point in, clarity...you name it-- I've doubted it. And I'm not a very pessimistic person. I don't think I've doubted because I'm a doubter—I think I've doubted because as a human, it is in my nature to take an idea that is thrown at me and explore two sides of it—the bad and good.

This got me started on thinking about doubt. Ah, yes, the famous doubt. —verb; to be uncertain about; consider questionable or unlikely; hesitate to believe. I know I doubt. I know you doubt. I know we doubt as a congregation, as it's in our mission statement. Alright y'all, don't worry about it, by doubting we're being faithful so lets just take our questions, pack up and go home. Just kidding. That was my initial reaction. Doubt being an act of faith means (to me) taking the energy we use to look at something we like/believe in and using it to look at something we don't. I may not

believe in a majority of Judaism, but it's my duty as a born and raised Jew to explore what I can.

And we ARE famous doubters. Everywhere in our culture, and throughout history, are the ones who questioned their butts off, and were praised and punished for it. Their path of pessimism is parallel to the optimistic path of a religious person, except the doubter embraces two sides and is enriched in both. Here are some examples of these 'doubters'.

Helene Ayalon, a current artist, who took pink highlighter to all the passages in the Bible that degrade women somehow, and showed this highlighted Bible as part of an exhibit at the Jewish Museum. Ayalon grew up an Orthodox and then married a rabbi, but she is a very strong feminist. Her work with the torah inspired others to take highlighters and follow her lead, not

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just with degrading women but with other things they don't agree with. Helene Ayalon first had to have read the bible, and then she went back and called out the things that didn't roll with her. She got two sides of the story there.

Elisha Ben Abuya was a rabbi before 70 CE. One day, he witnessed someone following the rules of the Torah, and then dying—and another person not doing this and coming out alive. He was angry, and began to believe that there was no reward in following the Torah's rules. He became a serious rebel, so much that other rabbi's referred to him as "the other". Elisha Ben Abuya is not only a prime example of someone who doubted his culture, but also someone who broke out from the fear of G-d. I think that in my parsha, so much of the reason the people kept going is because of the fear of what would happen to them if they didn't.

I imagined being that doubter:

"Here I am, among everybody, and I'm lost! Where is my passion, and why doesn't I seem to fit?? I'm weary. I have escaped from Egypt, traveled the desert, all that good stuff—and here I am, donating and building and planning and following. But I'm awfully confused. My faith in g-d is minimal. I have been born and raised my entire life working, praying, barely believing. So, g-d finally comes along and grants us some luck, we escape Egypt—and then what? We're led into the desert where we encounter problem after problem. I don't know how I feel. G-d has never touched me personally, never given me signs or commanded me. I am lost in a sea of people who have been moved around so much (almost like chess pieces) that they'll follow whatever they can. I have a tremendous fear of g-d. I want to survive. Other people feel like I do, and I know I have this discontent inside, but the truth is...I'm too scared of a power that's much larger than me to act out. People are driven by fear—at least I am. When given a task, we don't want to fail. It's natural."

I feel like I'm a modern day version of this person. Throughout this whole Bat Mitzvah process, question upon question upon question has come up. And I thought—in this portion, p'kudei in the book of exodus, where are the questions? Where is the voice? Where is the person who sat down among all the consecrating and building and holifying and said—what?!

Thinking about my doubts and their reasons, and my image of a doubter's voice in my portion—they are almost identical, give or take a few things because modernism causes quite a big culture change. This doubter's and my reasons for doubting is not that we are horrible, stubborn people who refuse to believe in something we don't see in front of us. Yes, it's true that at times we've probably all sat down like a stubborn baby and wailed for all that we don't understand. But generally, we are good people, just confused.

And I'm sure that there are many, many people among us who have doubted, which is one of the fabulous things about this community. Knowing that there is that support, and that I am not the only one, I know that figuring out where I belong IS my Jewish journey. ■

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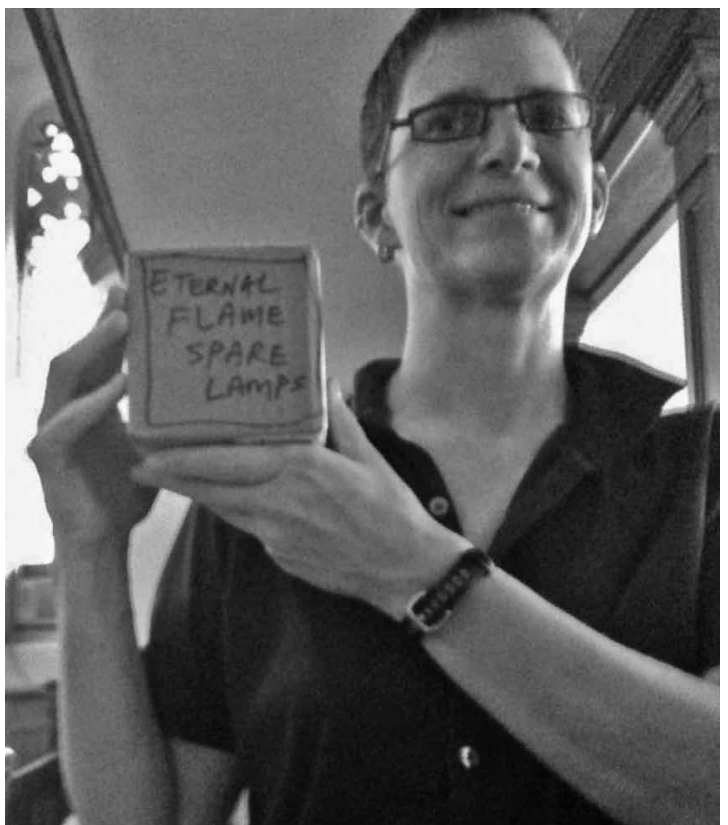
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Save the Date! **MAY 21**
IT'S **CHAI TIME** TO
CELEBRATE 18 YEARS



The whole problem with the
world is that fools and fanatics
are always so certain of
themselves, and wiser people
so full of doubts.

– Bertrand Russell



Getting ready for the High Holidays