

“There’s a crack in everything”, sang Leonard Cohen, “that’s how the light gets in.”

Today, on Rosh Hashanah, we strive for wholeness and the conviction we need to attain it. We try to clarify our goals, refine our sense of purpose, and recommit fully to what we are certain will heal and redeem us.

But allow me to inject a dose of doubt. Let me suggest that to question it all, to reconsider everything you believe to be true and good and right, is a necessary step to illuminate your path forward in life.

“There’s a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in.”

Most of us don’t much like cracks. They frighten us. To most of us a crack is a sign of weakness or vulnerability. Doubts are for the indecisive among us; people who get lost in all their questions.

To me, doubt is a sign of profound strength. In some religious traditions, doubt is even a prerequisite to enlightenment. In ours, it’s part of the journey towards self-discovery and peace.

In a provocative comment on the Akedah, the Torah portion we read today, Rav Soloveitchik shares the following insight about the nature of our spiritual quests:

At the beginning of the religious experience lies the sacrifice of essence; at its end, the discovery of essence. Indeed, man cannot discover himself without the sacrifice. For man can find only that which has been lost, and none can retrieve a thing unless it has first left his keeping."

The certainty that we seek and around which we want to build our lives, in other words, can only be discovered once we have sacrificed it for the revelations that come from doubt.

Before we tackle the paradoxical role of doubt in finding spiritual clarity, let's unpack it in the more practical realm of how we relate to one another.

Your colleague of 10 years presents a solution to a vexing problem in your business that you find preposterous. It would cost an untold fortune and is nothing more than a quick fix that would only resolve the issue temporarily.

With the certainty of your feelings you reject the proposal outright. And not only do you let your colleague know your opinion, you draft a letter to your department expressing it for all to know. Aside from averting what you think would be a minor disaster, you also succeed in making a new enemy.

Now let's try it another way. Given that this is someone you've worked with for 10 years, before rushing to respond to his proposal with the certainty of your convictions, you indulge in a little doubt. You don't necessarily question the soundness of his idea – it may really be

misguided. But you wonder about what other than foolishness could make him think that way.

Slowly, as you ponder what's behind his suggestion, you begin to sense his insecurity, his fear: of losing business in the interim, of possibly losing his job, of disappointing the boss you share.

Alongside your rejection of his idea, you begin to have some understanding. You are able to respond to him now with more patience and with compassion. You open a conversation instead of shutting one down.

By doubting your reaction that his idea was just plain stupid, you create a crack in your own armor that allows a light to illuminate another soul, and in so doing preserve a relationship of respect and collaboration.

In a fascinating article that chronicles the rising belief across multiple disciplines that doubt ought to be a critical component of our thinking, Diana Rico points out that "Healthy doubt can aid conflict resolution, create a fairer justice system, deepen intimacy in personal relationships, boost self-confidence and increase our tolerance of differing views."

The problem, she explains, is that we are hard-wired to eschew doubt and uncertainty. The "fight or flight" response that underpins our brain's processing makes standing in the place of uncertainty counter-intuitive to us. It's further complicated by our culture valuing strong and clear-cut thinking and recoiling from uncertainty.

Rico notes how in 2009 a team of Dutch psychologists discovered that our human brain reacts within a quarter of a second to statements that contradict our personal ethical beliefs. We almost instantly stop listening and start fighting.

Is it any wonder why our politics are so polarized? Why most people can barely have a civilized conversation about the upcoming election? Why negotiated settlements in conflict-ridden countries remain so elusive?

Our challenge is to slow things down, pace our reactions to one another, and allow for the possibility that everything is **not** as we see or understand it to be.

As Rico suggests, "If, when someone's in our face with his opposing opinions, we remind ourselves that he might be swimming in doubt, our stance toward him might soften. And if, when we ourselves react in a knee-jerk way, we step back and do a little self-examination, we might uncover some doubts about our own views. Recognizing that we are all human and vulnerable, we might then begin to explore a more honest exchange of ideas and feelings."

Consider the Rule of Six, a practice devised by Paula Underwood Spencer, a woman of Native American descent who shared much wisdom in her writings about life and relationships.

When someone does something that provokes in us a strong, hostile reaction, before exploding or seething, we come up with six plausible explanations as to why that person did what they did.

Here's my take on an example of the Rule of Six I read in a different piece by Joy Hosey:

You find yourself wondering: why did my wife not kiss me goodbye when she left this morning, especially if she knows I'm not feeling well?

Before getting mad, apply the rule of six:

1. She's an inconsiderate witch;
2. I'm so pathetic, she's lost interest in me romantically;
3. She's afraid of catching whatever I have;
4. She was afraid I might ask for help with something and make her late for work;
5. She assumed I needed to rest and didn't want to disturb me;
6. She was running late because she was up half the night with me.

These are six possible reasons for why she hurt you. When you assign probabilities to them, chances are it was an innocent event. At this point, having been willing to question or doubt your own assumptions about the situation, you're likely to be less angry and more open to a productive conversation when she calls you later. If she remembers to call...

Some of us might be motivated to embrace doubt by the connection we have to the other with whom we're locked in disagreement. If they are someone we know or care about, maybe we can be convinced to take the time to question. Maybe we could learn to open conversations and dialogues by first reinforcing the values we both hold and the vision we share, creating a context of understanding and fellowship in which to try

to respectfully resolve our differences. It's a good tactic Rico's article suggests.

But what if our opponent is a stranger, or worse, an enemy?

In her essay, Rico introduces us to Jon Rudy, a global consultant who brings peace-building strategies to Central and Southeast Asia and Africa. He's had to embrace doubt to succeed in his work.

Rudy and his colleagues were approached by an army general in the Philippines who wanted them to train him in conflict-resolution. At first they resisted and were mistrustful. To them this man represented the source of so much of the strife they were attempting to help resolve. Rudy also comes from a tradition of pacifists. He never imagined working with the military. But after questioning their own resistance, they trained the general in peace-building and interfaith relations and before long the general was instituting dramatic changes in the army that contributed to the nation building they were all seeking.

Imagine if the leaders negotiating some of the conflicts that mean most to us – as Jews, as Americans -- were able to harness the power of doubt, were prepared to question their assumptions about their own motivations and those of their opponents.

Rico quotes Howard Zinn, the late historian who wrote a well-known essay in 2004 called "The Optimism of Uncertainty" in which he advises us to question our assumptions that all that we know about the world, its leaders and institutions will remain unchanging. "We forget", he wrote, "how often we have been astonished by the sudden crumbling of institutions,

by extraordinary changes in people's thoughts, by unexpected eruptions of rebellion against tyrannies, by the quick collapse of systems of power that seemed invincible." How prescient Zinn was.

Rico further shares how in 2011 a group of leading scientists and philosophers were polled about which scientific concept they think would improve every person's cognitive toolkit. An unexpected number answered that the concept of doubt was the most valuable. One physicist explained: "The very foundation of science is to keep the door open to doubt. Precisely because we keep questioning everything, especially our own premises, we are always ready to improve our knowledge."

If the case for doubt has been made when it comes to dealing with each other and the world around us, what is the role of uncertainty when doing business with ourselves?

One psychologist Rico mentions has written about the boost to our self-esteem we experience when we doubt our own self-doubt. When we're convinced of our insecurity and lack of worth, we find ourselves on a very dark path. But when we're prepared to question our feelings of despair, he says, it can mean the life-saving difference between self-destructive behavior and reaching out for help. If we admit to not fully understanding everything about our feelings, fears or anxieties, we create a crack in our defeatism, allowing in the light of possibility and hope to help us find our way.

Many religious traditions note the significance of doubt as part of one's inner journey. Christianity's Dark Night of the Soul is seen as an experience

of radical unknowingness, of profound spiritual uncertainty, which leads to clarity and reaffirmation. One Zen teacher was quoted as saying, "The Great Doubt is when you don't know what you're here for, what anybody's here for, and you're just thrown into this radical uncertainty that makes you dive into the very depths of your heart and mind to try to find an answer from the inside."

Do you remember the revelations of Mother Teresa's spiritual crises that only made her redouble her work for the poor? One Jewish take on the role of doubt is about similarly practical matters. "Everything God made in the world has a purpose", proclaimed a Hasidic rebbe. "What is the purpose of doubt in the existence of God that some profess?" challenged his students. "The purpose of doubt in the existence of God," the wise teacher explained, "is this. If a needy person asks for help from someone who believes in God, the believer may respond by saying, 'Have faith! God will provide.' A non-believer, however, behaves as if there were no God on whom the needy person could rely and thus he or she feels compelled to help." When it comes to showing kindness to others, even doubting God can be crucial.

Karen Starr is the author of a book that took a lot of my attention this summer, not for its length but for its depth. [Repair of the Soul](#) is an effort to compare metaphors of transformation in psychoanalysis and Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism. It was a gift to me from some cherished fellow seekers with whom I share the yearning to journey mindfully through life.

There are many associations between mystical conceptions of inner, spiritual change and the psychic and emotional growth at the heart of psychoanalytic theory. One very powerful link is this idea of the need to

stand in the space of uncertainty, to break down our assumptions and question our knowledge of both self and others, in order to be open to the possibility of new insights and be carried forward by the shifts they create within.

Starr explains that faith, either in the classical sense (which some have come here today to discover or rediscover) or faith in our human capacity for change (also what we're here to nurture) is not something that involves creating the illusion of security. Rather, faith requires surrendering to the shattering of security.

We must be willing to tolerate the ambivalence and even the chaos that fracturing the illusions we have of ourselves unleashes, until the openings allow for insights and truths to evolve and move us to reorganize the shards of our fragmented souls into new, more perfect, if scarred beings.

Some will hear in these words echoes of the Lurianic mystical conception of the very creation of the world we mark today on Rosh Hashanah. In the process of creation, they teach, during the pouring of God's essence into vessels, the overwhelming presence of God caused the vessels to shatter, sending fragments embedded with divine light throughout the universe and forming the material world as we know it. In order to fix the vessels and return the pieces of light to their source we engage in human acts of tikkun, of repair. These acts are not only about healing connections between people and between us and the earth, but fundamental to cosmic tikkun is the repair of our own souls, each of which is a fragment of divine light striving to return and reconnect with our Divine essence.

The Kotzker Hasidim speak of the wholeness of a broken heart; of the importance of experiencing pain and despair because they open us to sensitivity and compassion, lead us to true relationship – with self and others – and, paradoxically, to true joy. By embracing the cracks and fissures, the light that we allow in illuminates for us a truer sense of ourselves, and leads us back to a sense of oneness with those around us and with the Source of Life itself.

The message is this: to relive the drama and the promise of creation today we have to find the courage to stand in the face of our own shattering in order to be repaired. We have to be willing to undo everything we know of ourselves in order to be remade. This is true faith, in the fullest sense: the clarity and purpose we attain when we're willing to question it all.

Listen to the words of Rav Soloveitchik one more time:

At the beginning of the religious experience lies the sacrifice of essence; at its end, the discovery of essence. Indeed, man cannot discover himself without the sacrifice. For man can find only that which has been lost, and none can retrieve a thing unless it has first left his keeping.

We can only find what we are prepared to lose.

On this day of Rosh Hashanah, if you're searching for your way, you would be wise to first allow yourself to wander. If you're seeking clarity, let go of your certainty. "From the place where we are absolutely right," wrote the poet Yehudah Amichai, "flowers will never grow in the Spring".

Old Japanese tea masters, when they made their utensils, would make sure that there would be a flaw in a spoon or bowl, reminding themselves and those who would seek to quench their thirst from their vessels, that nothing is flawless; that cracks are important.

While most explain the Jewish tradition of leaving a part of every newly constructed building unfinished as a nod to keeping alive the memory of the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, I think it might be telling us something more profound: Always keep a part of ourselves unfinished, incomplete, even uncertain. Only then can we be sure to evolve and to glimpse a coherent understanding of ourselves and of our lives.

As we head into the second half of our service now, heed the advice of Leonard Cohen:

*Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.*

Shanah Tovah.