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YOM KIPPUR MORNING 5771

Sermon delivered by Rabbi Dr Michael Hilton, Kol Chai Hatch End Jewish Community

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One of the best events at Kol Chai in recent years was what we called the Dawkins debate, when we had an evening about belief in God. Dawkins has been in the news again with the recent paperback launch of his book *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution*. Stephen Hawking too has had plenty of media exposure in the last couple of weeks. In his famous book *A Brief History of Time* Hawking wrote that if we could understand how the universe was created, we would know the mind of God. Now in his new book *The Great Design* (published on Rosh Hashanah) he has retracted that stating that we can explain the start of creation without bringing God into it.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in his "Thought for the Day" broadcast on Erev Rosh Hashanah, stated that there is no conflict between science and religion. Science, he said, is about explanation, religion about meaning. He gave an example. Suppose, he said, science could place an exact time and date on when the universe was created. Would anyone want to celebrate that anniversary each year? Yet we Jews celebrate our own anniversary of creation every year on Rosh Hashanah. Religion demands a different relationship to the world from science.

Now I don't think Lord Sacks has got it quite right here. The fact is that in the mind of very many people, scientific discovery and technical advance really do undermine religious belief. I think it's no coincidence that since we've had such high profile writers coming out as atheists, many members of Kol Chai have confessed to me that they don't believe in God. Sometimes that doesn't stop them coming to shul, but for others it does. This year 80 of our 320 Kol Chai households have not applied for High Holyday tickets, that's one in four and the number goes up each year. Those who do not come remain members, so they clearly want to identify in some way with the community and with Jewish life, but not with the prayer side of what we offer.

So all this has set me thinking: can the prayers which we say on this most solemn and important of days mean anything to a non-believer? Can atheists get anything out of this service? Clearly the main themes of the season, of saying sorry for what we have done wrong, of trying to turn our lives around and make a new start, do not require a religious belief. Every humanist would accept that saying sorry and trying to make amends is a good thing. There is much in our prayer book which really makes us think about our lives and where we are going. The Jewish dimension to this requires that we think not just of ourselves at this time, but the needs of others, including our

own community, our fellow Jews and of Israel. None of this requires a belief in a deity. Indeed, it has often been pointed out that the verb to pray in Hebrew is *hitpalel* which means "to work on ourselves". Prayer is for our own good.

But the fact remains that God is mentioned on every page, almost every line of this morning's long service. Many prayer books, not so much ours, but many traditional prayers books for Yom Kippur contain long prayers and poems about angels praising God. To take them literally would require not just believe in a deity but in a whole world of spiritual beings.

But this itself leads me to suggest that we are not expected to take it all at face value. After all there are many different ideas of God expressed in the prayers, and some of them are inconsistent with each other. In the song *Ki hinei KaChomer* God is likened to a potter moulding the clay, a mason breaking the stone, a blacksmith shaping the iron, a weaver patterning the cloth—a humble a simple craftsman. And yet in our most well known High Holyday prayer, *Avinu malkeinu*, God is *Avinu* our father and *Malkenu*, our King, very different images and ones difficult to reconcile with each other, for if God was at the same time both our King and our Father that would make us all Princes somewhere in line to inherit his Kingdom. The obvious inconsistencies mean that all these terms are just poetic images, and the prayer book deliberately leaves room for many different ideas of God. For everyone who believes does so in a slightly different way, and everyone who disbelieves has different ideas of what it is they don't believe in. So particularly to those who find the whole idea of praying to God meaningless absurd or just tedious, I ask you to ponder this: go out and look at your nearest High Street. Think what an incredible feat of human co-operation is required to get the buildings up and maintained, the food and clothes in the shops the cars on the road, and how much, despite our hostility and our wars, human beings are capable of, and do in fact co-operate with each other. And then reflect that this amazing cooperation the division of labour the body politic the economic reality, all this which we see around us, depends does it not on an understanding the we human beings are interdependent, that we can have made so much progress together which we could never have made alone. Why do humans co-operate? Is it simple logic that it's better for us? Historically it has been more than that human co-operation has been driven by religious belief, and I think, particularly by monotheism, the idea of a unity behind everything. As I put it last night, when we say God is one we mean that on this world we stand or fall together. If the word God is a stumbling block, try using a different word. Perhaps, as I suggested last night, we could think about spirituality instead, the human need to reach beyond our material and even beyond our emotional needs.

The real problem is that not that some of us believe in God and some do not, but rather that we have come to think of religion as divisive not as uniting, of separating groups rather than bringing them together. And yet at the same time as having a growing awareness that we all live in one world, people today have an astonishing belief in individualism, a world in which the news I hear, the games I play, the videos I see, the pastimes I take up, the culture to which I belong are all to some extent manufactured for me. The huge range of choice opened up by the internet culture is

our modern world too, and leads so many to hunger after roots in a world where so many have lost sense of where their family came from, to hunger after a shared culture in a world where so many have only individual mini-cultures, to grasp something which can mean more than the special offers and the world cup. And because there is, I believe in all of us this hunger for spirituality, we in our Jewish communities need to embrace Jewish atheists and bring them in. There is too much at stake to allow God to stand in the way. There is too much at stake to allow the word "God" to stand in the way. Building a better world, strengthening Jewish life, helping others, does not demand belief in God. But it does demand a belief in humanity. We who believe would say that the optimism which expects and demands and urges the perfection of humanity is God given. But that still leaves loads of space for non-believers as part of the enterprise.

Our first Torah reading this morning, in which Moses asks to God to have a vision of his glory, seems on the face of it an impossible one for a non-believer. But in the story God replies that he cannot be seen. There is a mystery at the heart of belief. If Moses could not understand God, how much less can the rest of us understand. I take this story to mean that God did not want us to have proof of his existence, and maybe even does not require everyone to accept a literal belief.

This year, we are going to experiment with reading the Book of Jonah in the morning instead of the afternoon, so that more people will be here to enjoy the wonderful story of the prophet who ran away and was swallowed by a fish. The story teaches the power of repentance. Jonah is forgiven and the people of Nineveh, described in our prayer book as the Nazi storm troopers of the ancient world, repent immediately they hear Jonah's message. They too are forgiven. In this story God is an active character, who has the power to destroy cities, send a storm or a fish or a plant that grows up overnight (the old translations call it a gourd). But you don't have to believe it as literally true to see the power of the story and the message it holds. Jonah is just that, a story, a fable with a message. Jonah, we've already heard, is an alienated man: he is mortified by the evil and corruption in his world—he even says at one point he would rather die than live. It is a predicament which speaks powerfully to so many in our time. And we can accept this message, I think, without being put off that the story is also about God. For on the level of interpretation it still makes sense, whether we accept God as literally true, the force behind everything, or as a fable behind the human story. Either way the idea of God can be the glue that holds humanity together when all else fails, even in a cynical age. People of different beliefs, believers and non-Believers, religious and secular, can on this day, I feel, say the same prayers and truly mean them for beneath it all there are shared values which urge each and every one of us in this room to stand up and take responsibility for our lives.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.