

Ted Lasso and the Healing Power of Belief
Kol Nidrei 5783/2022- Rabbi Mara S. Nathan

From the moment it was released on Apple TV, Ted Lasso captured the hearts and minds of streaming viewers everywhere. The series is about an American college football coach who is hired to oversee an English football team. Lasso tries to win over the skeptical but passionate English fans with his folksy, optimistic demeanor, while attempting to overcome his complete lack of experience with the sport.

So many people told me I *had* to see it....and I meant to. But it wasn't until we were stuck in COVID quarantine last December that I had a chance to check it out. I was instantly hooked. Yes, I was charmed by the slightly cheesy humor and the great chemistry among the cast. But there was something else.

At a time when Americans are more divided than ever, gridlocked over social issues, race, gender and the economy, I felt that each 30-minute episode of *Ted Lasso* was like a balm to my soul.

At first I thought, it's because he's always so nice to everyone. He seems to understand who they are, accept them for where they are and ever so gently prod them towards who they might yet be. I thought, this sounds like a perfect, straightforward Mara Nathan high holiday message to me. But it was more than that.

Ten months later I am still pondering what makes me feel so hopeful about Ted. I keep going back to that hand painted gold and blue sign that he tapes over the locker room door at the end of the first episode.

BELIEVE

Initially I thought, cute: believe in our team, believe in yourself, believe in the power of positivity. There are so many ways to interpret that sign. But the more I watched, the more I kept wondering. What *is* it that Ted wants them all to believe? What's it supposed to do for them? Is it meant to do something for us too?

Erev Yom Kippur is one of the most powerful moments in the Jewish year! It's a time that we want more than anything to believe: believe in our ability to grow and evolve, believe in the potential of God's grace to once again write us into the book of life, believe that there is something greater in this world than just ourselves.

As Rabbi Lev Yitchak of Berdichev taught: There is a special energy, an attractive force we feel at this time of year...drawing us in, asking us to believe.

But the concept of belief can be tricky in Judaism. The first of the ten commandments says *you may have no other Gods besides me*. It doesn't say: You must believe in me. The rabbis knew how profoundly difficult it is to believe in something we cannot see, touch or hear, and emphasized that our commandments tell us how we should behave. As I learned from my professor Dr. Eugene Borowitz: We might not be clear on our relationship or understanding of who or what God is, but it's pretty clear what God wants us to do and be.¹

It wasn't really until the Middle Ages, that Jewish philosophers started telling Jews what they were *supposed* to believe. And then as modernity turned more and more to science to make sense of the world, Liberal minded Jews shifted away from God as an all-powerful being, emphasizing God as both a force of and inspiration for good.²

This isn't to say that modern Jews can't or don't believe in God, it's just that most 20th and 21st century theologians- whatever their own personal observance level understand that ultimately how to believe or what to believe is a very personal thing.

To be honest this is both good and bad. It's good because each of us is a unique person with our own experiences and thoughts and inner life. So, our personal relationship with God is going to be unique too. But it's bad, because sometimes it's just so much easier when someone tells you what you should do or think. Sometimes we would just like to be presented with a good plan and told *what* to believe! Yet deep down we all know that unless that belief comes from within, the healing power that faith can bring will always be missing.

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As Reform Jews, many of us feel most comfortable focusing on the Prophetic side of our tradition. We not only pray for a more just world, we believe it is our responsibility to speak up and be part of the change. Of all the teachings on our beautiful stained-glass windows My favorite is from the book of Isaiah: *You are my witnesses. Says the Eternal; and my servants whom I have chosen.*³ God wants us to notice what is not right and accept that we have been chosen to make it better.

¹ [A Touch of the Sacred](#), Dr. Eugene B. Borowitz & Frances W. Schwartz

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/must-a-jew-believe-in-god/>

³ Isaiah 43:10

But this emphasis on Tikkun Olam- repairing the world- is only part of who we are and what we believe. How many times have you heard me say: “The rabbis of old taught the world stands on three pillars: Torah, Avodah, Gimilut Chasadim. (Study, worship, acts of loving kindness.)”

We need to use our brains, our bodies *and* our souls to keep our world from teetering out of control. Of course we should be committed to helping others. But we shouldn't forget to nurture our own inner life, to give some attention to the spirit within.

Recently a friend texted me a .gif (you know those images with texts overlaid on a picture.) When I clicked on it I saw a big glowing ball that was a representation of the sun with little model planets lined up in front of it. There was an arrow pointing to an almost microscopic ball which I assumed was earth because the text read: “A gentle reminder: you live here.”

I responded back: “I get it, don't take yourself so seriously....our planet is a speck in the universe and we are even less significant.” But a few moments later that image hit me in a completely different way. I typed, “but that picture makes me feel like I am going to be swallowed up at any moment by all the forces around me that are totally beyond my control.”

To which my very wise friend replied, “But maybe it's when we feel like the world is going to explode that we most need that perspective. That there is something bigger than us out there. Maybe *that's* what prayer is for. To help us make peace with the fact that we are never fully in control.”

Nothing like getting pastoral counseling from your friend on i-message.

The early 20th century Lebanese American writer, poet and visual artist, Kahlil Gibran wrote: “Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future, but from wanting to control it.” So, faith is not about discovering the right words or the right prayers, the right thing that will somehow make the world just as we want it to be. Maybe belief comes when we figure out a way to just ‘be’ within the unquantifiable vastness of the universe.

Some of you know that my father Daniel was diagnosed with a brain tumor right after Thanksgiving. While the tumor was benign, and the surgery to remove it deemed successful, my intelligent, stubborn, supportive, and loving father has not fully recovered. His physical and intellectual impairments along with other health complications, make it impossible for my mother to adequately care for him. So instead, she goes to visit him at the Hebrew Home in Riverdale, every day.

Sometimes my dad is still pretty much my dad. He'll make jokes, complain about the state of the government, he'll worry about antisemitism and Israel, he'll play gin rummy, listen to jazz, enjoy a sandwich. But other times he is confused, or tired, or frustrated. I know my mother experiences so much anxiety every day because she is not sure which Daniel she will find.

You might think that as a rabbi who sits with so many people as they navigate their own rocky terrain that I know what to do. But I don't. I want to help my mother figure out a life for herself that isn't only about preparing for and recovering from her visits with my dad. But I can't. Not really. I can suggest, I can listen, I can help problem solve and I can listen some more. But ultimately, I am not in control of her life and I cannot control what will be.

Every single one of us here tonight has experienced loss, faced uncertainty, and felt deeply unhappy. Not everyone wants to talk about their loss or their pain. But for many of us, there is comfort and healing in recognizing that we are not alone. ⁴

Rabbi Harold Kushner, asks in his famous book "When Bad Things Happens to Good People,"
Why do we have to insist on everything being reasonable?
Why must everything happen for a specific reason?
Why can't we let the Universe have a few rough edges?

Which makes me think about that picture- with the enormous sun and the teeny tiny planets
 And I realize I have some choices- we all have some choices to make. We can assume that our lives are insignificant in the universe and let it all go. Or We can allow the overwhelming enormity of the challenges we face overtake us. Or we can believe.

Like Isaiah said: we can be witnesses and know that just showing up- whether we were asked or not means everything.

We can believe in the healing power of community- and allow others to support us at our most vulnerable times.

And try to believe that no matter what happens, we are exactly where we are meant to be, even though it is so hard to make peace with the uncertainty of it all.

When we first meet Ted Lasso, he seems perpetually positive. But we soon discover that he has his own struggles and suffers just like everyone around him. Ted needs to believe just as much

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2021/04/23/989888314/nora-mcinerny-how-can-we-face-lifes-rough-edges>

as everyone else. And as the story unfolds, he does. He allows the people he is trying to help and heal, help and heal him too.

This is the journey that Yom Kippur leads us through. We are meant to spend a full 24 hours in prayer and contemplation, to open up our wounded hearts to the Universe and to God and we are meant to forgive each other and ourselves for the rough edges of our lives. So that when the Book of Life is sealed once more, we might find renewed strength in the knowledge that the power of belief surrounds us all.

For some, a sense of belief may come from quiet contemplation. Or maybe you were born with an unwavering connection to God. But I think for most of us, it's a decision to act- to seek out purpose and meaning to be honest with ourselves about who we are and who we would like to be. To give ourselves permission to accept that life can be quite unreasonable. So that when that big ball of light feels overwhelming and we feel so small- even out of control, we remember there are still seven other planets in our solar system standing by so we don't have to go through it alone.

May we all find comfort, connection, and a stronger sense of belief in the year to come.

AMEN