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Brain Dump: *The Torah*

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov once said, “If you are not a better person tomorrow than you are today, what need have you for a tomorrow?” The reading of the Torah this week has come at a very important time for those of Jewish faith, like myself. This time marks the Jewish high holy days, which include Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Rosh Hashanah is the Jewish New Year, and Yom Kippur is the day of atonement, both of which cause Jews everywhere to reflect on their lives and evaluate themselves as people in our civilization. As I have been reflecting with the Torah and Rabbi Lerner’s words, both in the synagogue and in our very own Neville Hall, I have deeply pondered not only the Jewish faith, but what it means to me to be a Jew.

After reading the Torah in its plain form, outside of a synagogue where Rabbi Lerner helps us to understand the meaning behind the text, I have thought about what the literal form of the Torah means to Jews. I have realized that in my interpretation of the Torah, it is not meant to be taken literally. The messages that the Torah sends are powerful, showing us as Jews what type of people we should be. But, as the Rabbi says, we can not ignore the fact that the Torah was translated to fit the agenda of whomever was a leader at the time. While the key parts of the Torah remain important, the details are merely decided by the perception of the reader. We, as Jews, view ourselves to be good people with good intentions and strong morals. Therefore, we must use our own judgement to decide which parts of the Torah are not meant to be taken

literally due to their seemingly moral impurity. We are not a people to make decisions about our beliefs based solely on what a text tells us to do. Personally, I could never imagine even thinking about shunning a person for their beliefs just because a text tells me to, and I can assume that most Jews would align in their beliefs on that subject. The G-d that we believe in would never turn someone away for their beliefs. As Rabbi Lerner told me in a private conversation after the lecture, "Jews focus on what we do, not what we believe." Our actions as not only Jews, but as decent human beings, are what determine our inner goodness, not how closely we follow a text. For example, I am horrified that other religions justify hatred towards homosexuality because they believe that G-d would not approve. If anything, I think that religion would be an argument in support of those who are homosexual. As good people, we should accept even the beliefs that we do not understand. I take great pride in saying that my Rabbi is homosexual, as two of the most controversial topics of homosexuality and religion align in Judaism.

Along with understanding the the purpose of the Torah to me, as a Jew, I have also thought about what it means to be a Jew. To be a Jew is to be a part of something greater than yourself. To be a Jew is to be a part of a family with a set of distinct values and ideas of moral goodness. Judaism is less about religion than it is about humanity and what it means to be a member of civilization. I have tried to explain to many people not of Jewish faith how I consider myself to not be extremely religious, but very Jewish. To most Christians, this did not make sense. How can one be very Jewish but not very religious? Are they not one in the same? No, in fact, they are not. Rabbi Lerner put my thoughts to words today, as she always does so eloquently, when she said, "Some of the most Jewish people I know do not believe in God. They might even consider themselves Atheist, but still very Jewish. Judaism is a foundational belief,

not just a religion.” This is the part of Judaism that I identify the most with. We do not talk much about the concept of heaven, leaving that up to the perception of each Jew, because we do not believe in a need for motivation to be a good person, other than the obvious moral benefits of internal goodness. As a Jewish people, we seek to help others constantly, often participating in what we call Tzedakah, charity that we see as a moral obligation. In all ways, Jews seek to be people of good character, not just good faith. Too often, I see humans participating in disgraceful actions, and then justifying their character with the phrase, “I go to church every Sunday.” Jews do not base character on attendance of synagogue, but on character.

This week’s selection is incredibly timely, being at a time where I have been asked to reflect on my own personal beliefs and actions as a member of society. On Yom Kippur all sins against G-d are forgiven, but sins against man are not. In order to achieve atonement, we must apologize to those who we have hurt in the past year, rectifying the situation in the human world, not just within the confining walls of the synagogue. This, I believe, is a major place where Judaism differs from other religions. In other religions, if you pray to G-d for your wrongdoings, you are forgiven. For example, a Catholic priest might prescribe 10 “Hail Marys” to atone for a sin, while Judaism requires you to directly rectify the problem. By doing this, you not only ensure that you are a person of good intention and character, but you also find satisfaction in your moral cleansing. During this time, especially the time between Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish new year) and Yom Kippur (the day of atonement), I look internally. Jews believe that not even death can rectify transgressions against man, so I look to my father in Heaven—or whatever G-d has in store for us after life—and I ask him for forgiveness for my lack of understanding and anger towards the end of his death. I look to my mother and apologize for times where I have

failed to show my appreciation for her. I look to those close to me and apologize for anything that I might have done, whether knowingly or not, to ensure that my soul is cleansed and that I have done all that I can to rectify any wrongdoings against humanity. With this, we see an example of what it means to be a Jew—what it means to appreciate all that is around you and always attempt to have the best character possible.

Overall, the Torah and the Jewish faith cause me to look internally each day of my life, but especially at the time between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. No aspect of Judaism is concrete. As Rabbi Lerner informed us, Jews are expected to question all things, including the sacred texts of the Torah. We are expected to interpret the Torah in a way that is meaningful to us, understanding that parts of it may not be relevant to our lives or to the time in which we live. Jews are a strong people, created by our past. We focus on the past of our people that brought us to where we are today, considering that a part of not only the history of our people, but the history of each individual. We are strong because the Jews before us were strong. We are a small people, with only less than a half of a percent of the world population being Jewish, but we are a powerful people. Throughout history, there have been countless attempts to wipe out the Jewish population, but we prevail. We place a strong emphasis on having children and raising a Jewish family, to ensure that the Jewish people will be on Earth forever. Simply put, my beliefs on Judaism define me as a person, and are extremely dense. To be Jewish is to be proud. I am one of the “chosen ones,” and I will live my life with the knowledge that I was chosen to be a person of good moral character in humanity.