

Wednesday, October 2, 2024
Rosh Hashanah Evening Sermon

“Believe You Me”
- Rabbi Barry Diamond

Sometimes we find wisdom in the strangest places. One time, I found it while standing in line at the market. The woman in front of me was probably in her seventies with hair dyed shocking pink to match her pink sunglasses. I said, “It must be nice to see the world through rose-colored glasses.” She said something deceptively profound, “If we’re going to choose which glasses to wear, why not choose these?” “Huh,” I thought to myself. Wearing rose-colored glasses could mean that we view the world through a lens of positivity and optimism, seeing beauty and potential even in difficult situations. However, it can also imply a level of naiveté, where we overlook or minimize the very real challenges and struggles we face. It could lead us to ignore important issues that require attention and action. Why would we ever want to choose naivete? And why does this woman, or anyone, think we can choose to change the way we view the world? The world just is what it is, isn't it?

That’s what I thought until I heard a psychologist named Jeremy Clifton. He became famous as a young man for pulling someone off a subway track who had fallen on the third rail, which carries all the electricity. One of the rules they teach

paramedics is *not* to grab someone who is touching the third rail. True to the rules of conductive transfer, when Jeremy grabbed him, he could feel the electricity coursing up his arm. Very dangerous. Very unwise. But he was rightly hailed a hero and interviewed on television. However, the interviewer felt the need to mention that the guy who fell was probably drunk. He intimated that the fallen man might have deserved what he would have gotten had Jeremy not been there. But Jeremy didn't view it that way. He said this incident showed we can care for people whom we don't even know. It's a remarkable gift that human beings can bring to the world. Jeremy's glasses were a little more rose-colored than the interviewer's. But Jeremy also learned this lesson from another person in his life.

While traveling in Europe, he was drawn to the tour guide named Sarah, as was everyone on the trip. When he had a chance to talk to her at greater length, Sarah told him her story of being a child in Poland during the Holocaust. When the Nazi's came to her town, they lined up all the Jews on both sides of the street, facing each other. They shot all the Jews on one side and took all the others to concentration camps. She ultimately ended up in Auschwitz, and in December 1944, she fell ill and was sent to the infirmary. If Auschwitz was the most horrific place on earth, then being sent to the infirmary was the cruelest irony. In the camp where they plan to kill people, there is a place where they are trying to heal

people? The absurdity was not lost on Sarah as she lay on her cot. She glanced to her left and saw another girl about her age, lying beside her. When they saw each other, they reached over, clasped hands, and just held each other. In that moment she realized the world is so full of love and connection that it's impossible to extinguish its light. For Sarah, it meant the world is so wondrous that she has no choice but to believe in God and to be grateful. What color glasses did Jeremy and Sarah choose to put on?

Sarah would have been fully justified in viewing the world around her as evil, and Jeremy Clifton would have been justified to be angry at the irresponsible fool who endangered both of their lives. However, they were wearing different, rosy glasses. But what if both perspectives were true? Certainly, Auschwitz is the definition of hell on earth, *and* it was a place where Sarah felt the warm spark of connection. The guy who got drunk, fell on the track and endangered Jeremy Clifton's life had made a terrible mistake that night, *and* Jeremy found an opportunity for one human being to care for another. What if both perspectives were true but we could choose which glasses to wear? What if we chose how to interpret our experience and what it means? According to Jeremy Clifton, we *can* choose and much of it depends on our beliefs.

When I'm talking about beliefs, I'm not simply talking about faith in God or heaven or angels, I'm talking about the fundamental beliefs that shape the way we see the world. It turns out beliefs really *are* like glasses that we wear. What glasses actually do is to bend and filter the light that reaches our eyes so we can see more clearly. Our beliefs do something similar. They bend our perception of the world around us; they change how we interpret what we experience. If we were in Auschwitz, God forbid, would we want to see the sparks of love and connection in the darkness, or would we prefer to see indifference, cruelty, and sadism? If we had the choice, which would we choose? The shocking thing is we have more choice than we might realize.

When I was in rabbinical school, I got caught in traffic on the 405. I know that's hard to imagine. As with most traffic jams, my own belief that the world is a hostile and uncaring place came roaring to the fore. I had someplace to be, and I was absolutely exasperated. It turns out that this wasn't just a traffic slowdown. It was a full-blown closure, so we sat there for ten minutes, then thirty minutes. It was clear that I was going to miss my appointment. But then something miraculous happened. We started getting out of our cars and in this age before cell phones, we shared whatever information we could glean about the stopped traffic. Even though it was frustrating and infuriating, we all had a perfectly good

excuse for missing our meetings; and we found the people around were funny and generous and just a pleasure to spend time with. As the cars started moving again after almost two hours, I felt relieved – and a little disappointed that this moment of connection was ending. If I had held on to my default belief that the world is often cruel and that strangers can be dangerous, that frustrating moment could easily have become excruciating. Instead, it was a mix of annoying and surprisingly enjoyable.

Think about some challenge or conflict you recently had. Maybe it was a customer service representative who wasn't helping solve your problem or a squabble with a family member. Is that challenge or conflict an example of a world where someone is constantly undermining you, or is it an example of good people with different goals and sensibilities who are trying to do what is right from their own perspective?

Judaism has been grappling with this very question for thousands of years. In some of our own prayers, like our prayers for creation the *Yotzer Or* or *Ma'ariv Aravim*, the rabbis were pushing back against the notion that the world is a dark place with evil in constant battle with good. When we hear other religions speak of the devil waging war against God, that's precisely the idea that Judaism has

long resisted. Because if we embrace this belief, people with whom we disagree easily become manifestations of evil. Instead, our tradition and prayerbook says that light and darkness, goodness and struggle, originate from one benevolent source, from God. Even within struggles and pain, we can see examples of love and goodness woven into the fabric of our world.

We can choose to focus on the light or the darkness by choosing which glasses to wear, according to Dr. Jeremy Clifton, now a prominent psychologist who studies how beliefs shape the way we experience the world. It's important to note that beliefs may not change what happens to us. A positive attitude can't prevent sickness or loss, but beliefs can shape *how we process experience*, a spark of connection in Auschwitz, a precious soul to save on a subway track, or wonderful people to meet on during freeway closure. Clifton says that we have at least three fundamental beliefs: the world is either good or evil; the world is generally safe or dangerous; or the world is dull and indifferent or magnificent and inherently interesting. This is where rose-colored glasses may play a role. Is the world inherently good, safe, and fascinating, or bad, dangerous, and dull? We can choose which way the light will bend and filter. You probably have your default set of spectacles. My starting point is that the world is pretty good, a little menacing, but utterly fascinating. Those are the glasses that I naturally wear when I see the

world. But sometimes, those glasses don't serve me well. So, I change my glasses, viewing the world as fundamentally dangerous, which hinders my ability to experience some of the excitement and joys in life. When my wife, Sandy, turned 50 years old, she skydived for the first time. (By the way, she didn't tell me until she was safe on the ground.) For her, the world is safe and full of adventure. For my fiftieth birthday, I also went on a plane but refused to jump out. Admittedly, I was on a 747 and the other passengers would have been distressed if I opened the door to jump, but you get the idea. I was not going skydiving – but perhaps that was to my detriment.

The truth is, most of us don't realize that we have beliefs that change our perception of the world, or, more importantly, that we can change them.

Thankfully, spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, and reflective study help us find the unique glasses that shape our world. We can decide if our beliefs improve or impede our daily experiences. For example, we often try to instill a sense of self-worth in our children. We want them to believe that they are perfect just the way they are, which is a beautiful belief. But sometimes our children, and frankly we too, can be ignorant, selfish, and arrogant. Self-esteem and self-confidence may not always be the beliefs we need.

Sometimes our belief-glasses work, and sometimes they are engines of pain, frustration, and suffering. Judaism and other reflective traditions urge us to question and examine if our view of the world is accurate and thoughtful. We may fully believe that someone is angry with us when, in truth, they are afraid of us. We look for any hint of anger, even a twitch of the eye, to confirm our belief. We may be sure that if we make a mistake, tragedy will strike and everything will be ruined, so we become so fearful that even the smallest risk feels overwhelming. Our beliefs change the way we feel about the world.

In a Reform Jewish community, we are not afraid to talk about our beliefs, be it about the relative goodness or safety of the world or about God. And we are delighted if you have a deep belief in God, and we are fine if you do not. But on this day of Rosh Hashanah, when we carefully reflect upon our lives, then it's right for us to ask which beliefs help us expand our world view, and which do not.

According to Jeremy Clifton's research, teaching our kids, and believing ourselves, that the world is filled with darkness and danger tends not to help. We well understand the real dangers of this world. We don't need to look far to see them, but neither do we have to look far to see the close partnership we have with our

state and local government and law enforcement agencies actively protecting the Jewish community.

As individuals and a community, the question we need to ask is: what glasses should I wear in my life; what glasses should we wear as a people? If you are now wondering whether you approach the world from a place of safety or fear or fascination, please note that you are asking this question, in part, because you are in a religious community that encourages question about belief, and meaning, and purpose. But wouldn't it be wonderful if we sought the answers a little more often? If we allowed ourselves to engage in some of the practices and discussions that make us take stock of our lives, that help us to question the virtues and values we live by, to notice which glasses we are wearing, how they bend the light, and ask if they are helping us to improve our lives and our community? I hope, more than anything, that you see the value of adding self-reflection into our very busy lives and recognize the benefit that comes from choosing helpful beliefs.