

**Rabbi Richard Agler
Keys Jewish Community Center
Tavernier, FL**

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Thoughts on Belief--from a Bookplate

**I want to read you an inscription in a Torah book we uncovered
during a study session last year:
“For Rosie: who didn’t believe any of this”**

**Funny, clever, a bit of a *zetz*
It was also fitting. For Rosie. Son Sam: “It was true.”**

**Scandalous? Sacrilegious? Inappropriate?
No, no and no. Let’s look at why.**

**First of all, Judaism not primarily about belief.
This may come as a shock but bear with me.**

What do we believe?

**Maimonides 13 principles? The ones we sing in the *Yigdal*?
Every one disputed sooner or later starting in 12th century.
By other rabbis, scholars and philosophers.**

**And Maimonides himself was famously mysterious about certain things.
In the “Guide for the Perplexed” he talks about
“True Beliefs” and “Necessary Beliefs.”
Which kind of makes you wonder what he really did believe.**

**As we look in *Torah, Tenach, Talmud*, other classic sources
There is considerably less about believing
than there is about doing--how to practice and observe.
There is still more on keeping the people together
from generation to generation.**

**So belief is not our biggest thing. It may be in some other religions.
If you don’t believe certain things in certain faiths, you’re outside the tent.
In Judaism, we’re pretty open about most of it.**

**One of the major things we do believe
is that the answers to the greatest questions are unknowable.
We may not have invented agnosticism but boy do we get it.**

Maimonides aside, what DO we believe?

**We believe that keeping the commandments leads to better human beings.
We believe in the survival of *Am Yisrael*—the Jewish people.
We also believe in at most, one God.
You believe in something less than one God?
We’re not going to throw you out.
Only if you insist that there is more than one do we have a problem.**

Did you ever learn about Pascal's wager?

The 17th century French philosopher reasoned,
in the absence of conclusive evidence either way—
which there is not--

that it is better to believe in God and be wrong than
it is to not believe in God and be wrong.

Pascal was likely thinking more about the afterlife than this one.

As Jews we focus more on this world.

But still, believing in One God who demands justice
is a better way to go through life than
believing in no God who asks us for nothing.

Second. Rosie, if you're listening, I want you to know that

I don't "believe" parts of this book either.

I'm not going to go into detail now

but if you want a hint, give some thought to that teaching by
Maimonides about necessary beliefs and true beliefs.

Remember too that faith is something we can grow in all life long
and that God is ultimately a mystery.

So Rosie and I are not only at least partially in company with one another,
we're in good company with many others.

As anyone who has ever looked at it seriously knows,
this book is Judaism 1.0.

Recognizing this, in the first centuries of the Common Era,
the Rabbis developed Judaism 2.0.

The philosophers of the Middle Ages developed Judaism 3.0

We could call post-Renaissance Enlightenment Judaism 4.0

And today we are maybe working on 5.0.

Each new version was necessary because people found shortcomings
in the previous one. Said another way, they didn't believe
parts of what came before.

It's always good to remember that the Torah is the first word, not the last.

And that learning too, is a lifelong endeavor.

We're big believers in that.

Finally, having said all this, I believe that Rosie believed
more than this inscription gives her credit for.

(For the record, this is the first *dvar torah* I've ever gotten from a bookplate.)

I didn't know her that well but I think I knew her well enough to know
that she believed in many of this book's core values.

She believed in learning. She believed in pursuing justice.

She believed in the irreducible dignity of every human being.

If none of this makes a dent for you,

keep in mind what some wise person said,

"There is no believer without his doubts

And there is no doubter without his beliefs."

**So as we begin the New Year we can maybe keep in mind that
what we believe, or don't believe, is important
not so much for itself
but for what becomes the foundation upon which we build our lives.
During these next ten days let's do what we can to clarify those beliefs
and build the best people we can upon them.**

L'shana tovah.