The Value of Doubt

Rosh Hashanah 5786

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"You are in the death zone. You are dying."

That's how Melissa Arnot Reid begins one of the most haunting passages in her memoir *Enough: Climbing Toward a True Self on Mount Everest.* She describes lying in a tent after an eleven-hour climb, suffocating in the thin air near the summit, her body frozen and exhausted.

"This is as high as I have ever been without oxygen. I can't believe I made it."

Even in this glorious moment, she was inundated with the voices of her childhood echoing in her head: *You're worthless. No one can love you.*

The mountain was brutal. But the real struggle was within—the question: *Am I enough?*

And the truth is—many of us carry that same question. Not on Everest, but in boardrooms and classrooms, in hospital rooms, in parenting, in prayer. Doubt isn't always about abstract questions of theology. Sometimes it's about identity, worth, the aching uncertainty of being human.

So let's begin here: we are not gathered here today because we have all the answers. We are here because we are still climbing.

Rosh Hashanah is not a day of easy clarity—it's a day for honest reflection. A day to whisper the questions we're often afraid to say aloud: *Am I enough? Am I becoming the person I want to be?*

And our ancestors knew this struggle. They, too, carried questions. They, too, walked forward in uncertainty.

The Midrash paints a vivid picture: Abraham grows up surrounded by idols in his father Terach's shop. One day, Terach leaves him in charge, and Abraham begins to challenge each customer. A man fifty years old bows before a statue carved yesterday, and Abraham can't help but ask: *"Really? You're older than your god, and you bow to it?"*

He pushes further: *"Can this idol speak to you? Can it protect you? Can it save you?"*

What Abraham offers is not ridicule but seeds of doubt. He's not trying to humiliate people; he's trying to help them notice the cracks in what they've always accepted. Transformation doesn't begin with certainty. It begins with daring to ask: *Is this true? Is this worthy?*

And then comes the moment that defines his life: God says, *Lech lecha—go forth.* Leave your land, your birthplace, your father's house, and walk toward a land I will show you.

But notice—Abraham isn't given a map. He isn't told where he's going or how long it will take. There are no guarantees, only an invitation into uncertainty.

Imagine that: leaving your roots, your culture, your family—based not on clarity but on a leap of trust. Abraham doesn't go because he's certain. He goes because he's brave enough to live with the uncertainty. His doubt doesn't paralyze him. It propels him forward.

That is the courage of sacred doubt: to leave behind what no longer fits, and to trust that the journey itself may be holy.

If Abraham shows us that doubt can propel us forward at the start of a journey, Moses shows us that doubt can challenge us once we're already on the path—when the question is not about where God is leading, but whether we ourselves are strong enough to follow.

At the burning bush, when God calls Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses doesn't leap up with confidence. Instead, he hesitates: *"Who am I that I should go?"*

It's not false humility. It's real fear. He has a past in Egypt as an exile and a fugitive. He doesn't feel worthy to lead his people.

But Moses doesn't stop there. He piles up excuses: *"They won't believe me." "I'm not a man of words."* Finally, *"Please, God—send someone else."*

This isn't casual reluctance. It's deep self-doubt—the terror of being inadequate, unqualified, unworthy of carrying something as weighty as God's voice.

And what does God do? God doesn't say, *"Don't be ridiculous, you're stronger than you think."* God doesn't offer a motivational pep talk. God simply promises: *"I will be with you."*

And later, when Moses presses again—*"What if they ask me your name?"*—God answers with mystery: *Ehyeh asher ehyeh—I will be what I will be.*

Not clarity. Not certainty. Just presence.

Moses is not chosen because he's fearless. He's chosen because his fear reveals the weight of the calling. His doubt is part of his integrity. And when he finally says yes, it's not because his questions are gone—it's because he decides to show up with them.

Abraham teaches us that doubt can push us to question the world around us.

Moses teaches us that doubt can expose our own vulnerability.

Together they remind us: doubt is not a weakness to hide—it is part of the sacred fabric of faith itself.

And what about us? How do we live with our doubts—in our families, in our society, in our world?

I remember a night at home when my daughter Abigail tested every ounce of my patience. There was yelling—some of it hers, some of it mine. A door slammed. I

stood in the hallway, flooded with doubt: Had I overreacted? Should I go back in? Was I too harsh—or not firm enough?

There was no rulebook. Just the ache of not knowing.

But in that moment, something softened. I realized: I didn't need to win. I just needed to reconnect. I opened the door, sat beside her, wiped her tears away and simply held her.

That night, doubt didn't weaken my parenting. It saved it. It made me slower to judge, quicker to listen, more willing to begin again.

And if doubt can open us up as individuals, it can also shake entire societies awake.

Think about the early days of the #MeToo movement. What made it explode wasn't new evidence—it was doubt.

Survivors began to doubt the shame they had carried alone. Bystanders began to doubt the systems they had trusted. Whole industries began to doubt the myth that *"this is just how it works."*

That kind of doubt was not a collapse of values. It was an awakening. It invited accountability. It led to truth.

Doubt, when rooted in conscience, can be the beginning of justice.

But justice is rarely immediate. Change does not happen in the full light of day. It often begins in the half-light—those in-between spaces where we are no longer who we were, but not yet who we are becoming.

Which is why the rabbis of the Talmud asked a deceptively simple question: *When does day turn into night?*

Their answer: we don't know. Twilight is uncertain. Some say it's the time it takes to walk half a mile. Others say it happens in the blink of an eye.

And isn't that the truth? Twilight is hard to pin down. One moment the world is bathed in light, and then slowly, almost imperceptibly, shadows lengthen. The sky deepens into colors that have no name—blue and gray, rose and violet all at once. You can't mark the precise second when day ends and night begins.

And yet twilight is not confusion. It is beauty. It is mystery. It's the moment when boundaries blur—when opposites touch. It's not quite light, not quite dark. It's a reminder that life isn't lived only in clarity. Life happens in the in-between.

Our tradition sanctifies twilight. We say blessings at *havdalah* as the day leans into night. We watch for three stars before we call Shabbat complete. Judaism insists that holiness is found not just in the sharp edges of day or night, but in the tender overlap between them.

I once sat with a congregant recovering from major surgery. They said to me, "I don't know who I am right now. I'm not who I was before the diagnosis. But I'm not sure who I'm going to be yet either."

That's twilight: when we're no longer who we were, but not yet who we're becoming. And the sacred work is not to escape the uncertainty but to dwell there long enough to let something new emerge.

Rosh Hashanah calls us into that twilight—not to fear it, but to honor it. To let our questions soften us, to let our doubts make us real.

Melissa Arnot Reid didn't conquer doubt on Everest—she carried it with her, step by step, until she reached the summit. Her climb was not a triumph *over* uncertainty, but a triumph *through* it.

And maybe that's our task too: not to silence the questions, but to keep walking with them, all the way to wherever our summit may be.

Twilight teaches us that we don't have to be fully in the light to move forward. We don't have to know exactly who we are becoming to take the next step. The holiness lies in showing up—in trusting that even in the in-between, even in the doubt, we are already on sacred ground.

So may we doubt—with integrity.

May we question—with compassion.

May we believe—with open hands.

And may we remember, as Superman once said:

"I am as human as anyone. I love. I get scared. I wake up every morning, and despite not knowing what to do, I put one foot in front of the other, and I try to make the best choices I can. I screw up all the time, but that is being human, and

that's my greatest strength. And someday, I hope, for the sake of the world, you understand that it's yours too."

Shanah Tovah U'metukah – may this be a sweet new year.