Advertisement

USA TODAY
PRINT THIS
Powered by Clickability

Rabbi Wolpe's 'Faith' takes on atheists and fanatics alike

By Cathy Lynn Grossman, USA TODAY

Advertisement
The more you shop, game, & bank online, the more you need identity protection.
VeriSign Identity Protection
Learn more >>

LOS ANGELES — Who loves questions more than Rabbi David Wolpe?

That's a trick question. Wolpe has incontestable faith in questioning — about science, history, evil, tragedy, mystery, and most of all about God. They are "all questions that could open doors," he writes in his new book, *Why Faith Matters*.

READ MORE: How Jewish beliefs compare to other faiths'; Jewish populations across the USA

And if "some questions had answers beyond what I could know," that would be all right with Wolpe, 50. He has encountered much of the tragedy and the mystery.

He has seen his mother struggle for 30 years with a stroke that left her unable to speak. His wife survived a rare cancer after the birth of their daughter. Then Wolpe developed a brain tumor. Four years after the tumor was removed, he was stricken with an unrelated, incurable form of lymphoma, which is now in remission.

In the past 11 years he has become a nationally known leader of Sinai Temple in Beverly Hills, a Conservative synagogue with 2,100 families. He has taught on theology and religion and science at the University of California-Los Angeles and studied Torah weekly with Kirk Douglas.

Before Sinai, he taught and wrote six other books. including a succinct handbook, *Why Be Jewish?*.

But he says that as he lay sidelined by chemotherapy, a question emerged: "Wow, I'm facing mortality. Is there something more I really want to say?"

Why Faith Matters is his answer. It addresses two great threats that have troubled him in recent years. The first is that the only choices on religion appeared to be cold denial or flaming fanaticism.

He was "infuriated" by a wave of best-selling books by atheists, including Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, all glibly sure that God does not exist and that faith is for fools, he says.

"What's so appalling is the idea that there is no mystery that won't yet be solved. That if we don't know it all yet, we will," Wolpe says.

The other is the threat of violent religious fundamentalism that turns belief into a scourge, he says.

"The tremendous good that is done by faith in this world is sometimes overlooked or belittled. But most of those who are able to stand up to tyranny and hatred feel that they do so because they are empowered by a force beyond themselves," he writes.

He wanted to offer what he has seen of faith as a rabbi who steps into "the privilege of every important moment" in people's lives.

"Faith is all about relationships: It's 85% of the day-to-day of life. Proving the Bible is not my point," he says. "To have questions is not the opposite of faith. Questions assume faith. They assume there is a God to ask 'Why?' "

Wolpe points out that the Bible is packed with great questions from the very first, when Adam and Eve are cowering in shame and

God asks, "Where are you?"

Faith, he says, is how you answer, "Where am I?"

You triangulate, he says. You find your place "in relation to other people, to your soul and to the world. You can't find yourself alone because faith is not in solitude. It requires others. It requires you to think that your soul matters. And it is worthless if it doesn't help you make God's world better."

In Wolpe's book, of course, that does not require Jesus, although he cites Christians as well as Jews who have found in faith the ability to "grow in soul, to achieve goodness, to work for causes larger than existence alone."

His vision of prayer is "you, leaping up. It is the constant possibility you can experience God's presence. To feel God powerfully, always open and available to those who open themselves to him."

And what was Wolpe's own prayer, through the brain surgery, through cancer treatment?

"God, stay close," he says.

The book comes with a forward by evangelical powerhouse Rick Warren, pastor and author of *The Purpose-Driven Life.* He calls Wolpe "a great soul, a brilliant thinker, and a captivating writer."

Warren says he wrote the foreword because, "although the book is not about Jesus, Christian believers can learn a lot from this candid account," just as some Jews tell him they did from Warren's book.

This fall Wolpe will take on the atheist arguments, debating Christopher Hitchens in New York in October and California in November.

Why Faith Matters is timed to Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, which begins at sunset Monday. The holiday ushers in the 10 Days of Awe, the period when Jews examine the past year and pray for a good year to come, leading to Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

The hardest question of these holidays is not, "How can I be better than last year?" says Wolpe, but rather, "What will I be like six months from now?"

Find this article at:
http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008-09-22-rabbi-wolpe-why-faith-matters_N.htm

☐ Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.