If I have one operating philosophy about life it is this: Be cool to the pizza delivery dude; it’s good luck.” Four principals guide the Pizza Dude philosophy. Principle 1: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness. I let him cut me off in traffic…without extending any of my digits out the window or toward my horn because there should be one moment in my harried life when a car may encroach or cut off or pass and I let it go. Principle 2: Coolness to the Pizza Dude is a practice in empathy. Let’s face it: We’ve all taken jobs…because some money is better than none. Principle 3: Coolness to the Pizza Dude is a practice in honor, and it reminds me to honor honest work. Principle 4: Coolness to the Pizza Delivery Dude is a practice in equality.

The passage I have just read was written by a professor of English, Sarah Adams, who over the years has held jobs including telemarketer, factory worker, hotel clerk, and flower shop cashier, but never delivered pizzas. The article is part of the playful opening entry in a book titled This I Believe: The Personal Philosophies of Remarkable Men and Women. The book is a compilation of oral statements from a series on NPR. Actually, the series is a continuation of one begun by the famous Newscaster Edward R. Murrow back in 1951. That was the MacCarthy era, so we can appreciate Murrow’s introduction to the program: “At a time when the tide runs toward a sure conformity, when dissent is often confused with subversion, when a man’s belief may be subject to investigation as well as his actions…” Have things changed so much in our day? Can we ever take the freedom to voice our beliefs for granted?

But all this begs an even more important question: what do we believe—about life, about people, about the world?

“I believe in empathy…there are mysterious connections that link us all together.”

She was fired from her position as a university professor for refusing to wear a veil. I believe in “the power of love to transform and heal.” The words of Jackie Lantry, a hospital clerk in Rehoboth, Massachusetts. When she asked her children what they believe in, they said “family. Michael Mulane, a law professors says: I believe in “the rule of law: The horrific events of 9/11 tempted me to think that interning people without due process might be the thing to do. Maybe we do need to sacrifice personal freedoms to be safe, but then I remembered that generations of Americans bled and died to create an protect the rule of law.” He was a naval aviator during the Vietnam War. I believe in “the light of a brighter day,” Helen Keller, from the original series. I believe in “a morning prayer in a little church,” Helen Hayes, after the death of her child. I believe “in the power of an idea,” Dan Gediman, the executive producer of the current National Public Radio Series, “This I Believe: The personal philosophies of philosophies of remarkable men and women.”

I love this book, maybe because I was a philosophy major in college. I remember when I went to the head of the department at Lafayette, George Clark, and told him I wanted to major in philosophy. His response was, “tell me Mr. Lindemann, are you independently wealthy?” I told him “no,” but I was considering becoming a rabbi, and he said, “well, OK then.” So, I studied all the classical philosophers—Plato, Socrates, Descartes, Kant, Spinoza, Hume, Locke, but somehow, we never got to the real question, which is, “what do I, personally, believe?” What do you believe? What do you believe
about life, about people, about the world? What do you believe that brings you here today?

What do you believe about this Mahzor that you hold in your hands? What do you believe about the words we say, the prayers we recite? *B’Rosh Hashanah*

*Yikateyvun; U-V’yom Tzom Kippur Yey-ha-tyemum:*

On Rosh HaShanah it is written; And on Yom Kippur it is sealed.
...Who shall live and who shall die, who in the fullness of years and who before; who shall perish by fire and who by water, who by sword, who by famine, who by thirst; who at ease and who afflicted; who impoverished and who enriched; who shall be humbled and who shall be exalted?

Who believes that God actually sits and writes these things in a book? How many take this imagery of *Sefer HaHayim* literally? How many think that God decides our fate for the year ahead, determines everything that is to happen to us, between RH and YK, writes it and seals it—fixed, final? Frightening thought isn’t it? And dangerous! Because if we take this literally, then we might also think that if we just show up on Rosh Hashanah and say the right words, we can somehow change our fate. Rosh HaShanah is Yom HaDin—The Day of Judgment day, so maybe our proclaiming prayer, repentance, and promising good deeds will convince *Shofeyt Kol Ha-Aretz*, the Judge of all the world, to change a divine decree. Do you see how this literal reading can lend itself to misunderstanding, and corrupt what we come here to do today?

Just a few weeks ago we read from the Book of Deuteronomy, *Parashat Shoftim:*

the Torah portion about Judges: You shall not pervert justice; you shall not show
partiality, \textit{v’lo tikah shohad}—you shall not take a bribe. Certainly, we feel that no judge should take a bribe. Yet, how many people come before the Judge of the whole universe with bribery in mind. If I say the proper prayers, O God, will you promise me health, wealth, and happiness? If I commit myself to your commandments, will you send me accomplishment and success? If I show up in \textit{shul} on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, will you grant me good fortune? But prayer, repentance, and tzedakah, deeds of charity based on justice, Tzedek, are not about getting God on our side. The words we recite are supposed to remind us to put ourselves on God’s side by the way we live in the year ahead.

The language of the Mahzor is metaphor. The point of the passage “Who shall live and who die,” is that so much of what can and may occur in the year ahead is beyond our control. Yes, of course, there are things we can do that determine some of this—war and peace, health care, healthy living—exercise, not smoking—building stronger levees—what we do as individuals and a society does make a difference. But there are things we cannot control: two days ago was 9/11—can we stop all terrorism? Will we ever be fully safe? What about accidents on the roads? Disease? The non-smoker who still gets cancer, the lump in the breast? There are upheavals in the market place and home mortgages? Bursting bubbles—that’s also metaphor. Who will be exalted and who will be humbled? Who knows?

So what do we mean when we say: \textit{U-t’shuvah, U-T’fillah, U-Tz’dakah},
Ma-avirim Et Roa Ha-g’zeyrah? Well, finally, our New Mahzor reflects an idea I’ve been calling attention to for years. The English translation in the old Silverman read—Repentance, Prayer, and Righteousness, avert the severe decree. That sounds like, we can actually change what is written. But that’s not what the Hebrew really says. It says we can avert Ro-a Ha-G’zeyrah—the severity of the decree, and that’s what you will read in our New Mahzor, and that means something very different. It means we may not be able to change what will happen to us or to our loved ones, friends or neighbors, but we can change how it feels. Severe decrees can be made less so by our deeds of kindness. When there is a disaster, tzedakah can lessen the impact. Where there has been a loss of life we can comfort; when there is a bad diagnosis we can be there with a kind word or no words, just a hug. I believe “in the power of presence,” writes Debbie Hall, a Red cross volunteer who helped the victims of Katrina. “Presence is a noun, not a verb; it is a state of being…true presence or “being with” another person carries with it a silent power—to bear witness to a passage, to help carry an emotional burden, or to begin a healing process.” We cannot change what has happened; but we can change what happens—by the way we respond. We pray for that, we promise that—U-t’shuvah, U-T’tfillah, U-Tz’dakah Ma-avirim Et Roa HaGzera. This, I truly believe. This I believe is what the Mahzor really means. What about you? What do you believe?
And when we say—On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. That’s not literal either. That’s about urgency. It means you can’t wait forever to turn your life around—to take what you say and do seriously. This I believe. What about you? What does it take for us to take belief seriously?

Consider this cute story: An atheist was taking a walk through the woods. “What majestic trees! What powerful rivers!” he said to himself. As he continued walking he heard a rustling in the bushes. Turning to look, he saw a 7-foot grizzly charging towards him. He ran as fast as he could, but looking over his shoulder he saw that the bear was closing on him. His heart was pumping frantically and he tried to run even faster. He tripped and fell on the ground, rolled over to pick himself up and saw the bear raising his paw to take a swipe at him.

At that instant, the atheist cried out: “Oh my God!”…Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. It was then that a bright light shone upon the man and a voice came out of the sky saying: “You deny my existence for all of these years, teach others I don’t exist and even credit creation to a cosmic accident. Now, you expect me to help you out of this predicament? Am I to count on you as a believer?

The atheist looked directly into the light, and responded: “You’re right. It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask you to treat me as a true believer now, but perhaps you could make the bear a believer—make him religious.”
Very well,” said the voice. The light went out. The sounds of the forest resumed.

And then the bear lowered his paw, took out a kippah, put it on his head and began to pray: *Barukh Atah H’... Ha-Motzi Lehem Min Ha-Aretz.*

Who shall live and who shall die? Prayer cannot change the world out there; but it can change us and how we relate to the word and how we live in it... if we take the words we pray seriously. This I believe.

Consider another reading for our new Mahzor. It interprets another passage from U-netaneh Tokef: *V’tiftah Et Sefer HaZikhronot:* You open the book of Remembrance, and it speaks for itself, for each of us has signed it with deeds.

This is the sobering truth, which both frightens and consoles us.

Each of us is an author, writing with deeds in life’s great Book. And to each is given the power to write lines that will never be lost.

No song is so trivial, no story is so common place, no deed is so insignificant, that You do not record it.

No kindness is ever done in vain; each mean act leaves its imprint; All our deeds, the good and the bad are noted and remembered by You.

So help us to remember always, that what we do will live forever; that the echoes of the words we speak will resound for all time.

May our lives reflect this awareness; may our deeds bring no shame or reproach. May the entries we make in the Book of Remembrance be ever acceptable to You.

To say that today is Yom HaDin, the Day of Judgement means that what we do matters. It makes a world of difference. This I believe. What do you believe?

You know, my philosophy professor was a very wise man. He understood my real interests and directed me toward the philosophy of William James. James wrote a
book called *The Varieties of the Religious Experience*, and a very important essay titled “The Will To Believe.” His basic thesis was that there are times when we cannot know for certain whether what we believe is true, but by acting on our beliefs they become true. One example he gives is a crowded train, on which a bandit announces a hold up. By acting together the passengers can certainly overcome the bandit, but no one knows for sure what the others will do. Now, suppose each individual chooses, by an act of will, to believe that if he gets up to stop the bandit, everybody else will jump up with him. Acting on that belief, then, creates the reality—everybody rises to thwart the robbery. It sounds simplistic. But then remember what happened on 9/11 six years ago. A group of passengers on United Flight 93 believed that it was up to each of them to stop the terrorist hijackers and prevent the plane from striking its intended target. They couldn’t save their own lives, but who knows how many others they saved. Their will to believe constitutes an extraordinary act of courage. God willing we will never be called upon in that way.

Still, there are so many cases where we cannot know the truth of a proposition, until we assert the will to believe and act upon it. Can your kind word soothe a troubled Soul? Will your act of tzedakah save a life in Darfur? Kotveynu Bahayim—At this season when we pray for life, will a post card on behalf of kidnapped Israeli soldiers convince Iran, Syria and Lebanon to show their families a sign of life? There are 1500 postcards out there. Every family has one. Do you believe we can make a difference? And what about when when your fellow congregants lose a loved one—will your coming
to shul make the minyan so others can have the comfort of saying kaddish? On Labor Day Monday evening, on the way into shul Amy Spigel said to me—I came because I thought there might be trouble making a minyan. She believed that, so she was there—and so were 19 others. We had two minyans, because people believed their coming might make a difference.

Araham Joshua Heschel was influenced by William James; he said that Judaism does not require a leap of faith, but rather a leap of action. Act as if you believe, and faith may follow. I know what you’re thinking—what kind of logic is that?

Well, as a philosophy student, I studied logic and let me tell you—nothing I learned prepared me for Talmud. Logic dictates that proposition A and its contradiction cannot both be true. Talmud, Tractate Rosh Hashanah, 11b: Rabbi Yehoshua Omer: Rabbi Y’hoshua said: B’nissan Nigalu Avoteynu, U’V’Sinnat Atidin L’higaeyl—Our Ancestors were redeemed from Egypt in the month of Nissan (at Passover), and future messianic redemption will also come in Nissan. To which the Gemara says—you’re right. Amar Rabbi Eliezer: But Eliezer says—B’nissan Nigalu Avoteynu, B’Tishrey Atidin L’Higaeyl—Our ancestors were redeemed from Egypt in Nissan, however future redemption will come in Tishrey (at Rosh HaShanah). To which the Gemara says—you’re right. But then the question occurs—How can they both be right? To which the Jewish answer is…that’s right too. The disagreement goes on for pages, and then guess what—turns out they are both right. Go figure! Mai Ika Beynaihu, so what is the difference between them? Had Amar—one believed that future redemption could only
come through a miraculous act of God, like the Exodus; the other believed that redemption, the messianic age, will come through individual acts of T’fillah, T’shuvah and Tzedakah. In other words, he believed that what we do here today can affect the future of the whole world. What do you believe?

I learned this bit of Talmud and its interpretation from my teacher Rabbi Yaakov Rosenberg. He believed that you could change the world by teaching Torah. He changed my world. This summer our TBS group in Israel spent a Shabbat with Yonk’s children and grandchildren. All of the older grandchildren have been officers in the army, one a tank commander, one led a counter-terrorism team in the territories, one is currently an intelligence officer trying to keep Israel safe from suicide bombers, but is planning to go back to his Yeshivah at the end of his tour of duty. The oldest daughter works for an organization called “One Family”—which cares for the families of civilian casualties. The youngest son is a teenager studying Talmud and the sports page. We sat in a park and spoke with them about their lives in Israel. We talked about the problems the country faces, the prospects or lack of prospects for peace, the lack of confidence in political leaders, the cynicism of many Israelis, the conflicts of the religious versus the secular.

And then Leora, spoke up. She is a 21 year old, soldier-teacher. Her job in the army is to work with Ethiopian immigrant children—to meet them at the plane when they arrive and to teach them Hebrew language and Israeli culture. She is charming and
charismatic and she told us she has learned form her work, learned Amharic, the
Ethiopian language, and learned their feelings about the new beginning they are making
in Israel. She taught us an Ethiopian Jewish saying, in Amharic: *Yazere Avevutch,*
*Yanega Ferafutch*—It means the flowers of today, are the fruits of tomorrow. How’s that
for faith in the future! Yonk would be so proud of the way his grandchildren are building
the Jewish future. We can build the Jewish future for our children, and grandchildren,
and we can build the future of Israel through our support. This I believe. Do you
believe?

But, belief is not enough. Remember Heschel: Judaism requires not a leap of faith, but a leap of action. Heschel means that you can believe whatever you want, but if
you aren’t prepared to act on it, it’s moot, it doesn’t make a wit of difference in this
world. If you say the words T’fillah, Tshuvah, Tzedakah with complete conviction, but
do not act on them—the belief means nothing. If you proclaim a belief in Judaism but
never make it to shul from one Rosh Hashanah to the next, or light candles, or say
kiddush, what does that belief mean? If say you believe in Jewish education but never
take a class, or constantly allow sports to take precedence over Sunday School, what does
that belief mean? If you believe in Israel but never give or go or lobby, what does that
belief mean?

Maybe you remember a talk I gave a few years ago the silly saying “It was the
least I can do?” Well this is about the equally illogical corollary: “It’s the thought that
counts.” How many times has that really worked, when you forgot the anniversary
present? Or the mother’s day card? It’s the thought that counts? Don’t count on it. It’s the card that counts. You better believe it. And what about today, sitting here with the Mahzor in hand—is it the thought that counts, or is it something more. So, let’s each ask ourselves—what do I believe? What do I really believe? And then, let’s go home and talk about it with our families and our friends, and how we are going to act on those beliefs in this New Year.

Folks, if we believe there is a God, then there are things we are tempted to do which we will refrain from doing. If we believe there is a God, we won’t be afraid to spend our limited resources of love and compassion, because we will have faith that God will be there to replenish us when we run out. If we believe in God, we will give Tzedakah and perform Mitzvot, because we know that it’s more than the thought that counts. If we really believe there is a God we will be cool to the Pizza Dude and kinder to others, because we will recognize the image of God in every human being. What a difference it would make if we all lived like believers in this New Year.

This I believe. What do you believe?