There is a story of a conversation between a new congregational rabbi and his predecessor. It’s almost Shabbat, and the new rabbi is in a hurry to find out the answer to a question that has been troubling him. Finally, he finds the elder rabbi and asks her, “I need to know what to tell the congregation to do this evening at services. What is our tradition for the *shema*? Do we rise?” The elder rabbi frowns and thinks for a moment, and finally she says, “No. That’s not the tradition.” “OK,” says the younger rabbi, “That's what I thought! The tradition is to sit for the *shema*.” “No,” the elder rabbi responds.” “Please help me! For months, ever since I got here, it's chaos – half the congregation stands, half of them sit, and they’re shouting at each other while I’m trying to lead the prayer! Suddenly, the elder rabbi remembers. “Ah yes, that’s the tradition!”

When I was in Rabbinical school, I felt like I was living this out. The students came from all over North America, and each had their own traditions. Some would sit for the *shema* and some wouldn’t. The same was true for other moments in the service. This is how I learned how widely traditions vary from place to place, and I learned the Jewish principle that wherever you are, you should follow *minhag hamakom,* the custom of the place. At first there was discomfort with the way this played out in our Hebrew Union College community. How were we supposed to observe the custom of the place if everyone was from a different place? And how were we supposed to have an authentic and cohesive prayer community if everyone was doing something different? There were times when half the group was singing *Oseh Shalom* and the other half was davening and whispering prayers. . And, when the mourner’s kaddish came, those mourners whose tradition was that everyone stand and recite the prayer together felt abandoned because others were not joining them in solidarity.

And those whose tradition was that only the mourners pray felt they weren’t getting their chance to be recognized and supported in their loss. Thankfully, unlike that new rabbi’s congregation, there was no shouting, but we had to get used to it, and eventually, I remember learning to say, “Please rise or remain seated according to your tradition,” an imperfect but reasonable approach to following the custom of the place for a community of transplants. The value of looking for the one right answer is deeply ingrained in us from an early age. I can still see my kids’ confused faces when they brought home those first more advanced math tests, where you receive no credit for a correct answer that doesn’t show your work, or you get credit if your process was solid, even if you made a miscalculation and got the answer wrong. In their minds, that did not compute.

Of course, in math, there is always an answer. There are times in our lives when the right answer is worth fighting for. But my rabbinical school experience underlined for me that religion requires an open mind.

 I feel blessed to be in a community that understands this, where the Church of Latter-Day Saints around the corner goes out of their way to welcome us into their building for high holy day services. And where the local Muslim congregation, when they had a need, took off their shoes and spread out their prayer rugs in our Social Hall during Ramadan. Many of us were here the night thousands of people of all faiths came to remember the Jews killed in Pittsburgh, and forty priests, pastors, imams, rabbis and cantors stood on the bema together. Despite the tragedy, it was uplifting. It didn’t matter whose prayers were said or what name we called God. There was a deeper truth being told.

Sadly, this openness is not felt everywhere in America today. Our country is seeing what happens when some groups feel their religious beliefs are just the right ones. Last summer, the Supreme Court affirmed the right of a public high school football coach to lead Christian prayers on the 50-yard line, holding up a helmet from each team. The ruling was based on a finding that the prayer session was voluntary, even though students reported feeling that to be considered a team player and get time on the field, they had to join the others in kneeling and bowing their heads. To me, this sends the message that if you feel strongly enough about your religious convictions, it’s acceptable to impose them on others.

We all know this problem can also be life-threatening. On abortion rights and reproductive health care, there are so many complex issues to address, one of which is a religious disagreement about when life begins. How could we answer that question definitively when contemplating the miraculous process of pregnancy and birth? Of course, there is no objective way to pinpoint the moment an embryo or a fetus becomes an independent life, and different religious traditions view this mystery in different ways. No single group should seek to force its view on anyone else.

Two thousand years ago, the Jewish people had a problem within their community. Talmudic sages were engaging every day in the healthy debates whose history we love to celebrate, posing questions and recording the many answers for posterity. These questions were important to them, though they might not be the ones we would be impassioned about: How much bread must be eaten to require saying a blessing? A piece as big as an olive or and egg? Or, if one’s mind wanders while reciting a prayer, does the prayer still count? How much credit do we get? What if we stop paying attention halfway, or 60 percent of the way through? The problem was, the disagreements over questions of religious observance were becoming more and more heated. Sages who found themselves in the minority were so sure they had the right answer that they were refusing to concede the argument. Divisions were building, and the unity of the people was crumbling. This anger, called *sin’at chinam,* or meaningless hatred, is exactly what the rabbis believed had divided the kingdom of Israel and caused its destruction centuries before. This time, they resolved the crisis with a now-famous story that changed Jewish thought and discourse forever, by shifting the focus, believe it or not, away from the right answer.

The story, called the Oven of *Akhnai*, is named after a new kind of oven, made of tiles, separated by sand. All of the rabbis agree that the sand leaves the oven vulnerable to ritual impurity, except for Rabbi Eliezer. Eliezer tells the group, “If I’m right, this carob tree will prove it.” The group watches as the tree levitates and moves a distance away. This isn’t what we expect to happen, but even more surprising is that the other rabbis aren’t moved! They just stand there waiting for more. Next, Eliezer causes the nearby stream to reverse course, and then, he begins to bring the walls of the study hall down on the group.

Finally, an angry voice from the heavens rebukes them all, “Why are you differing with Eliezer?” We would think the rabbis would be cowering at this point. But they aren’t. One of them, Joshua, challenges the divine voice. *“Lo vashamayim hi,”* he cries, quoting a verse of Torah. “It is not in the heavens.” And God... smiles.

I love this story. Not because it seems to say the majority can overrule the clear will of God. The rabbis of the Talmud know there is no levitating cedar tree or voice from heaven. I love it because a God who is amused at losing an argument is so different from the one who destroys the world in flood. Shalom Auslander, a favorite author of mine who grew up ultra-orthodox, tells the story of walking 14 miles to watch the New York Rangers’ play hockey on a Saturday, in the heat of the summer, drenched in sweat in his Sabbath-best clothing, darting across the highway and taking his life in his hands. Not for love of shabbat, and not for pressure from his community, but for fear of the bolt of lightning that would come the moment he boarded a bus. I love the story of the Oven of *Achnai* because it’s the ancient antidote to that type of fear of God. Because the message of God smiling as the people insist on following the wrong tradition is that the answers matter less than the way we pursue them together.

This text reminds us of how central the idea is in Judaism that it is the question, not the answer, that promises deep learning and thought, that brings dialogue and compromise, that allows for new interpretation and change. The answer closes doors and minds, takes away freedoms, and silences opinions. The religious traditions of the world bring us powerful questions. They help us explore and appreciate the mysteries of existence and keep the core values of humanity at the center of our communities. We are called by Torah to fight for these values, and I believe we are called to fight for religious freedom and for the recognition that religion does not answer every question. It is when we use religions to claim answers, to silence speech and learning, to ban books, exclude science and erase history that religions go wrong.

*Lo vashamayim hi,* it is not in the heavens. It happens that this quote from Torah that Joshua uses in the story is found in the portion we read on Yom Kippur, spoken by Moses to the people. There is even a tradition that he is speaking about the commandment of *Teshuvah*, repentance. “It is not in the heavens,” Moses tells the people. “It is very close to you, in your heart and in your mouth, and you can do it.”

In this text, its use in the Talmud and its use in our liturgy today, we see the opportunity to apply the value of moving beyond being right to the themes of Yom Kippur, to our day of repentance/teshuvah. On this day, we turn from answers to questions, as Rabbi Schwartzman suggested on Rosh Hashanah, from being right to being in relationship. We allow ourselves to be unsure, to replay conversations and experiences in our heads, moments when we were offended, when we deflected or ignored criticism. We open ourselves up to the times when we may have been wrong, or even just too sure that we were right. We step back from the world of answers, convictions, perhaps even beliefs, and turn to the relationships we care about.

In preparation for one of our family High Holy Day services that is held at the Church of Latter-Day Saints, something special happened that captures the willingness of one group to step to the side of its convictions to meet others in a place in between. The church leaders wanted to do everything they could to help us have a fulfilling prayer experience, and they sent me a message that took me by surprise. In their beautiful building, outside the sanctuary there is a long hallway, lined with framed Christian paintings. These images are clearly meaningful to them, representing an essential piece of the way they see God. Still, our neighbors understood that looking at these paintings might take us away from our own relationship with the divine, and they offered to take them down for our visit.

Although it might have been nice for us to enter into our Yom Kippur service without these images, I responded that removing them wasn’t necessary. If they were ready to set aside a big piece of their religious vision to create an interfaith space, we could come into their space, just as it was, and respect their religious expression while offering our own. I was inspired by the church’s ability to model religious acceptance of us in this way. To show us that this exchange wasn’t about belief, or theology, it was about relationship. It was not in the heavens. It was very close to us, right here in Falls Church. Interactions like these, when we can set aside our own sense of the right and the wrong answer, are the moments when we allow relationships to grow, deepen, and even heal. These are the moments when God smiles.

As with religion and our interfaith work, I have always felt that the most important aspect of seeking and giving forgiveness is that there is almost never a pure right and wrong. More often the lines are blurry. We might have spoken harshly, judged too soon, failed to act towards our loved ones, with love. Maybe we argued stubbornly. At the same time, when we spoke harshly, perhaps we were provoked! When we judged, we may have judged correctly. And when we argued, we could have been right. As we cling to this certainty, as we hold on to our own hurt, "It is not in the heavens” challenges us to remember that we can be right, and still be wrong. That the correct answer is often less important than the bonds we share with our loved ones, friends, partners in community.

What can we learn if we blur those lines even just a little bit? How can our understanding deepen? The work of Yom Kippur is not far away. It is not in our minds. It is right here in front of us. Let’s turn towards the relationships that are important in our lives. Let’s learn from our traditions that allow new interpretations and change. Let's remember, sometimes the questions are more important than the answers.