We Jews are NOT, to use the nomenclature, a ‘faithful’ people.

Faith is not a requirement. Not even a starting point.

And although we are often referred to in modern academic parlance as a “faith community”, it is—in fact—highly questionable whether a common faith or set of beliefs is actually what binds us together and defines us as a people

Instead, we Jews are a community—not defined by faith—but by identity. An identity that is far deeper and broader than the mere label: Jew.

As matter of fact, when we speak of our collective identity in Hebrew, we usually do not say Am Yehudi, the Jewish People, but rather, Am Yisrael, the People of Israel. Or as Pharaoh in Exodus describes us as Am B’nai Yisrael, the People who are the Descendants of Mr. Israel, of Jacob, who was titled Godwrestler.

Tomorrow as the sifrei Torah process through the congregation we will sing Am Yisrael Chai – The People of Israel Lives!

In identifying ourselves as the People and Descendants of Jacob-Israel we are affirming our identity as participants in our people’s ongoing historical narrative.

We are not merely preserving tales or venerating memory. Rather, as if through some time-warping Google Glasses, our people has come to realize and view the present by looking through the lens of our narrative past. We are affirming that the past is often present around us, with us, and within us.

In fact, we sense that life is most fully realized, most fully dimensional, when we can ground ourselves—not merely in the three dimensions of the present, but also by living in multiple dimensions of time, simultaneously—but especially the experience and narrative of our collective past.

The great philosopher of Jewish history, Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi wrote:

“For whatever memories [are] unleashed by the commemorative rituals and liturgies [are] surely not a matter of intellection, but of evocation and identification. ... what [is] suddenly drawn up from the past [is] not a series of facts to be contemplated at a distance, but a series of situations into which one [can] somehow be existentially drawn. This can perhaps be perceived most clearly in that quintessential exercise in Jewish group memory, which is the Passover Seder. Here, in the course of a meal around
the family table, ritual, liturgy, and even culinary elements are orchestrated to transmit a vital [i.e. living] past from one generation to the next. The entire Seder is a symbolic enactment of an historical scenario . . . Both the language and the gesture[s],” writes Yerushalmi, “are geared to spur, not so much a leap of memory as a fusion of past and present. Memory here is no longer recollection, which still preserves a sense of distance, but re-actualization.”

That is what we are doing here at the New Year; re-actualizing, fusing the present with the past—as a people, as a community, as individual Jews and those who support us as Jews.

But to fuse past and present together first requires a choice, a selection from our people’s vast historical narrative.

A generation and community rich and cosmopolitan in our exposure to, and familiarity with, diverse narratives, we are less confident when asked to identify with the narratives of our own people. We may feel overwhelmed by the sea of stories the stretches out vast before us.

And to speak truthfully, at times these narratives feel less like our own family stories and more like those of distant and often inscrutable cousins. Too often we have been exposed to them only in erratic fragments, often leaving us feeling ambivalent and bifurcated.

And yet, we yearn for identity and meaning, connection and community. We sense that we too have an intimate and inextricable role and place in this vast 4,000 year treasure trove.

We need not be intimidated. We need not be experts, nor devotees, to stake our claim. Any more than one need be a certified lifeguard to enjoy swimming a few laps or just floating in the pool.

We do not need an encyclopedic knowledge, but simply sufficient familiarity to frame our own coherent narrative. We need only recognize ourselves as modern successors and participants in the on-going drama.

In March, BHS member Bruce Feiler, authored an article ‘The Stories That Bind Us’, reporting on the work of psychologists Marshall Duke and Robyn Fivush. Their research on children with disabilities explores the question of why some children tend to do better when faced with challenges than others. Not surprisingly—at least to me—“The ones who know a lot about their families” tended to do better dealing with adversity.

Families have narratives they tell to define themselves.. Those narratives can be ascending or descending; we worked hard and achieved success, or we lost it all. But “The most healthful [type of] narrative,” according to Dr. Duke, “is . . . called the
oscillating family narrative: ‘we’ve had ups and downs in our family. But no matter what happened, we have always stuck together as a family.’”

Children with the greatest strength and resilience have what the researchers call a strong “inter-generational self.” They know they are part of something greater than themselves. Something that precedes them and to which they are attached. “What sociologists call sense-making, the building of a narrative that explains what the group is about” and one’s own particular place within it.

Likewise, faith communities have their own defining narratives, fashioning our own intergenerational identity:
B’chol dor vador hayav adam lirot et atmo k’ilu hu yatza miMitzrayim;
In every generation a person should see themselves as if they came out of Egypt personally.”

That is why so many non-religious Jews, and so many non-Jews find the experience of the Seder so compelling. It is our annual Springtime opportunity not simply to read, or recount, but rather to make sense of ourselves, to embrace and identify as participants in this on-going narrative. We depart from the Seder feeling linked to past generations, but also empowered by our own roles in the narrative present and future.

Six months later, Spring gone and Summer concluding, we gather as a community, to—once again in Professor Yerushalmi’s words— to evoke and identify, to re-actualize, to fuse past to present, and present to past.

We focus at this season not on our historic origins, not on slavery, nor liberation, but on the very purpose, the mission statement—if you will— of our people.

We gather to define and reiterate that mission. To focus on those narratives that help define us as a people and as individuals, as participant and supporters of Am Yisrael:

Tomorrow morning, we will read Abraham challenging God at Sodom and Gomorrah: “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?” . . . Far be it from You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that innocent and guilty fare alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”

On Yom Kippur morning we will read the words of Deuteronomy, Lo baShamayim Hi! the Torah is not in Heaven! Thereby evoking the Talmudic tale of Rabbi Joshua quite bluntly telling God to stay out of an argument between the Sages. Rabbi Joshua quotes from this very Torah verse: Lo ba-Shamayim Hi! It is Not Heaven! In other words, the Torah is no longer in Heaven. You God gave it to us, but now stay out of the argument.
In the very next sentence the Talmud records R. Nathan meeting Elijah the prophet (who roams between Heaven and Earth) and asking him: What did God do at that moment? — Elijah responds: God laughed [with joy], saying, 'My children have bested Me, My children are victorious over Me.'

And on that same morning we will chant the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Is not this the fast I look for: To unlock the shackles of injustice, to undue the fetters of slavery, to let the oppressed go free; and to break every cruel chain? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and to bring the homeless poor into your house? When you see the naked, to clothe them, and never to hide from your own kin?

And by mid-November we will read in the Torah cycle of our progenitor and namesake:

That night Jacob was left alone. And a being wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When he saw that he had not prevailed against him, he wrenched Jacob’s hip at its socket, so that the socket of Jacob’s hip was strained as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But Jacob answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob.” Said the other, “Your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.” Jacob limps away, not perfected but transformed.

These select narratives, these tales, assert that — although outcomes matter (deeply) — it is nevertheless the effort that defines us. We stand in the footsteps and shoes of those who have gone before us. Of those who have trail-blazed the path on which we are walking.

We are the children of Abraham, still challenging God’s justice. We are the descendants of Jacob, still wrestling with the Divine to transform ourselves. We are Isaiah’s offspring, still channeling the prophetic challenge to do justly. We are the progeny of Rabbi Joshua, still refusing to back down or be intimidated just because others invoke God’s name or power.

And we are also descendants of the reluctant prophet Jonah, whose tale we will read toward the very end of these Days of Awe. We too have tried to flee God call and command, but have in that flight discovered that God’s compassion and Israel’s mission extends beyond borders of self and tribe, to all peoples and places.

No, we are NOT a simple ‘faithful’ people. We are complex and complicated. Stiff necked and stubborn. We are strivers and strugglers against that which is inequitable or unjust, against accepted wisdom and convention.

We do not give up, even when we suffer a defeat. And even when we limp away, we know our efforts make a difference.
We are part of a narrative that has yet to conclude, and in which we are still claimed as characters and called upon to participate.

We are the people who—time and again—are called upon to challenge preconceptions of what should and could be.

We are Godwrestlers, Arguers with God.

But if that could be called a Faith – then just perhaps, we do deserve to be called a ‘Faithful People’.

Shana Tovah.