

Yom Kippur Sermon 2015/5776

Rabbi Edward Elkin

God vs. Religion

This Yom Kippur, I'd like to address you concerning an affliction which has become widespread in the Jewish community in our time, and which concerns me greatly. It's a spiritual disorder called PTGD -- "Post-Traumatic God Disorder"¹ in which sufferers fail to find any connection to God in their lives. PTGD is a condition of persistent mental and emotional alienation from God occurring as a result of any of the following: a history of mean or irrelevant Hebrew school teachers, endless, boring, and repetitive religious services, and/or crises of faith over such questions as why in this world bad things happen so often to good people, why the Bible and the prayerbook contain so many disturbing or unbelievable passages about God, why prayers so often don't seem to get answered, and why some religious people of all faiths who are believers in God do awful, immoral things. Symptoms of PTGD can include disturbing flashbacks to the original traumatic religious experience, alienation from prayer reflected in a dazed look during the intonation of the liturgy, constant glancing at the watch or at smuggled-in reading material or electronic devices during services, lack of consistent observance of religious rituals (except perhaps those of eastern religions), and dulled responses or numbness to all matters religious.

PTGD is a complex malady which is not simple to treat. No medication has yet been developed which has been shown to successfully relieve sufferers of their symptoms. A treatment known as spiritual direction has shown some promise, but much more research needs to be done. Many sufferers find themselves inflicting the same experiences which brought about their PTGD on their own children, in a tragic and self-perpetuating cycle of alienation from God and religion. And it's not just a Jewish affliction, it's culture-wide: According to an article in this week's Sunday New York Times,² the top Google search using the word "God" last year was for a video game called "God of War", and while Pope Francis got 2.95 million searches last year, and Jesus got 4.7 million searches, for what it's worth there were 49 million searches for Kim Kardashian.

Whether you yourself suffer from chronic PTGD, periodic acute bouts, or perhaps know someone who is afflicted, what I'd like to offer you this Yom Kippur is not a cure -- but a few thoughts that might help. My premise is

¹ Term suggested by Rabbi David Ingber.

² "Googling for God", Seth Stephens-Davidowitz, Sept.19, 2015.

simple, but I suspect somewhat controversial. It is that we have confused two things which are actually quite separate, and those two things are God, and religion. If we can disentangle these two in our minds, understand what is bothering us about each, and what each does or can do for us, then we're well positioned to figure out how the two actually do relate to each other. My hope is that this insight about the real relationship between God and religion will go a long way towards helping sufferers of this affliction, and indeed all of us, achieve a healthier and more positive attitude towards both.

The idea that God and religion are two separate things, often in conflict with each other, is not a new one. A few examples from Jewish history will suffice, going all the way back to the Bible. The prophets of Israel had extraordinarily powerful personal experiences of God, but railed against the hypocrisy of the religious practices prevalent in their generation. The ancient rabbis, who declared prophecy to be over and assumed for themselves God's authority to determine what Torah actually consisted of, often sought to de-emphasize the individual personal experience of God in favour of the observance of communal religious norms. Maimonides wrote a Guide for the Perplexed, in which God is so abstract, so distant, so impersonal, so difficult to talk about in human language – that all but the most rarefied intellectual follower of his system would find it difficult to have any personal relationship with God at all. Spinoza declared Judaism not to be about God, but rather a set of laws that hadn't been relevant for the 1,600 years since Jews lost sovereignty in their land – he was excommunicated for making this radical claim. Kabbalah and the early Hasidic movement represented the welling up of a powerful love of God as the focus of Jewish life – and as such they aroused great opposition from the religious authorities of their time which declared them to be "out of the mainstream" and sought to tame them, to domesticate their most God-intoxicated impulses.

In these and so many other ways, Jewish history may be seen as an ongoing titanic struggle between God on the one hand, and religion on the other. And now I think some clarification of terms is in order. While God is very hard to define, for the purpose of this talk, an experience of God is one in which a person has contact with an extraordinary reality beyond our own regular day to day lives. (I'll say more about it in a minute.) Religion, on the other hand, is a set of communal norms by which we are meant to live our lives, developed and enforced by institutions. In all the examples I shared from Jewish history, these two – God and religion – have been in conflict with each other. My goal this Yom Kippur is to show that while they are not the same, and while they are sometimes in conflict, God and religion each in fact has its very important place in our lives. The best treatment for what I've been somewhat whimsically calling PTGD is to disentangle the two, understand each better for what it is, discern why each has been such an

enduring part of the human experience and what dangers each poses, and find ways to make the inevitable tension between the two a creative one in our lives.

What is God? Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, whose social activism I referenced on Rosh Hashanah, was also an extraordinary spiritual teacher. He writes about the phenomenon of wonder, and about achieving a state of “radical amazement” about the universe. A contemporary student of Heschel, Rabbi Art Green, with whom I had the honour to study this past summer in Yerushalayim, writes about experiencing such a state of wonder in his contemplation of life on earth: “What about the courage of the first creature ever to emerge from sea onto dry land?” he asks. “Do we appreciate the magnificence of that moment? Or the first to fly, to take wing into the air? Or the moment...when animals were divided from plants, when one sort of being was able to take nourishment directly from the soil, while another [developed] the mechanism to feed on plant, and then animal life. How is it possible, with all of them descending from the same single-celled creatures?...Our task as religious persons is not to offer counter-scientific explanations for the origins of life. Our task is to notice, to pay attention to, the incredible wonder of it all, and to find God in the moment of paying attention.”³

God, for me, is present in this experience of wonder; God is present when we have all kinds of experiences that are beyond the everyday, like when we hear a beautiful piece of music, or see an exceptional piece of art, or read a poem that goes right to our very soul and almost seems to know us. God is also present at the times when a relationship with another person goes so deep, that it transcends all the inevitable demands and tensions of daily life -- and becomes love. God is present when we are out in nature and feel awestruck at its beauty. God is present when, as in the case of Jonah whose story we read on Yom Kippur, something helps us to overcome our baser instincts and do the right thing. Or when when we are moved to extraordinarily unselfish acts of generosity and kindness that can't be rationally explained. God is present at those moments of terrible loneliness, sadness, failure, or despair – when something we can't describe accompanies us in that dark place, enabling us to go on. God is present in those increasingly rare moments in our culture when we are able to be really focused, alert, aware and present – undistracted by electronic devices or the thousand things we have to take care of.

Some people endeavour to capture their experience of God in words. One ancient example is the prophet Isaiah, who had a vision of God sitting on a

³ Radical Judaism, pp.21-22.

throne directly above the Temple. His train filled the sanctuary, and He was attended by two seraphs, fiery angels who covered their faces with their wings lest they look upon God's face. The seraphs cried out to each other קדוש קדוש קדוש ה' צבאות מלא כל הארץ כבודו – "Holy Holy Holy is the Lord of Hosts the whole earth is full of His glory".⁴ The Temple shook on its foundations and filled with smoke, enveloping God in an impenetrable cloud. Isaiah was filled with mortal terror, supremely conscious of his own inadequacy and ritual impurity, yet ultimately ready to fulfill the mission God sent him on.⁵

Isaiah's terrifying vision represents one type of God-moment that has been recorded. But it's certainly not the only one. Even within the Bible itself, there are many other images. Elijah the prophet experienced God not in the wind, not in the earthquake, not in the fire, but in the קול דממה דקה – the still small voice.⁶ And if we move forward in Jewish history, the images and the metaphors change. The liturgy of the High Holy Days is full of varied images. God is Avinu. God is Malkenu. In the beautiful piyut *Ki Hinei Kahomer* chanted on Erev Yom Kippur, God is also imagined as a potter, a mason, a blacksmith, a sailor, a glazier, a draper and a smelter – because in fact even the everyday can be wondrous if we allow it to be. And a darker side: in a piyut from the 12th century, written in the wake of the massacre of Jews during the first crusade, God is addressed as an Avenger of Jewish blood.⁷ In a beautiful passage from Mishnah Yoma, R. Akiva likens God to a mikveh, and in so doing conveys a sense of God as an immersive experience that you enter naked, just as you really are, no hiding, no prettifying – and you're cleansed.⁸ God over the centuries has been Redeemer, and Revealer, and Shepherd, and Rock and Judge and Lover and Mother and Warrior and Refuge and Healer. And in this contemporary prayer, God is a teacher, helping us with the challenges we in our time face around our use of language: "Lend us the wit, O God, to speak the lean and simple word; give us the strength to speak the found word, the meant word; grant us the humility to speak the friendly word, the answering word. And make us sensitive, God, sensitive to the sound of the words which others speak – sensitive to the sound of their words – and to the silences between."⁹

So many metaphors have been developed across the centuries by individual God-seekers, and they are among the great spiritual resources of our tradition as individuals seek to make connections to that other reality, each in her or his own way. Language is a great resource, even if it is, like all the

⁴ Is.6:3.

⁵ Karen Armstrong, *The History of God*, pp.40ff.

⁶ 1 Kgs. 19:12

⁷ David ben Meshullam, *Lev Shalem* machzor p.339.

⁸ M. Yoma 8:9

⁹ Sheldon H. Blank *Mishkan Tefilah*, p.284.

others, ultimately limited. But at this point we have to ask, where does religion come into the picture? What do the prescribed communal norms of a religious life have to do with these very individual powerful experiences of a reality beyond the everyday, which many of us call God?

Religion, as I see it, has at least two important functions. First, as William James observed, those extraordinary moments of spiritual connection, those moments of wonder, always, by definition, evaporate. We can't live our lives there, much as we might like to. The symphony's final movement ends and the spell is broken. The stunning sunset finally yields to the blackness of night. The passion of love gives way to the routines and claims of daily life. The state of amazement over God's creation isn't sustainable and we begin to take the earth for granted. Some people are gifted with the ability and the inclination to stay in those moments of wonder, those God moments, a bit longer than others, but no one can stay there forever. All this is normal. We cycle in and out, depending on a whole host of factors including our own individual openness and receptivity, which like so many other aspects of who we are is partly innate and partly can be developed. But whatever our proclivities in this area, we can't stay there forever. And the first purpose of religion is to provide a framework for us to stay faithful to those extraordinary God moments, even when we're not present in them, even when they've faded away. The customs, the traditions, the prayers that religions are so good at – they provide a structure for us to remain aware of God, aware of the possibility of experiencing a God moment, even when we're not feeling it.

The second purpose of religion is community, it's about helping us feel a sense of belonging that lifts us up in so many ways. We are blessed that there are some among us who are wonderful at creating and sustaining positive, healthy, dynamic communities. These religious folks help provide a structure for individuals to fulfill their obligation to mutually support each other in good times and in bad, honour ancestors and transmit values and norms to the next generation. Religion also enables community members to reach out beyond the community itself, to help others in need more effectively than anyone can as individuals – as we do every year for example at the Narayever in our Yom Kippur tzedakah appeal, and as so many faith groups are doing at this time in response to the refugee crisis. A dramatic example of the power of religion from this past year was the Mother Emanuel church in Charleston, after the massacre. If you haven't watched the video of the memorial service, I recommend it. You'll see members of a congregation whose pastor, along with seven other community members, has just been murdered in a vicious racist attack. You'll see the parishioners memorializing those they've lost, but also ecstatically and joyfully affirming their faith in the future and the strength of their community – raising their

hands in a gesture of acceptance, loudly singing songs of faith from their tradition, dancing, shouting, extending extraordinary, almost inexplicable forgiveness to the young man who had only days before committed this devastating crime against their community, and clearly feeling the power that that forgiveness gave them, relishing being together and supporting each other at this horrific moment of loss. It was great davening. To me, that scene represented religion at its best. Community. People lifting each other up when they needed it most.

So God and religion are different, and each comes with its gifts, and its dangers. Those ecstatic God moments can lead some people to become unmoored from the requirements and limitations of everyday life in a way that sometimes hurts themselves or others. Rabbinic texts reflect a deep wariness of this phenomenon, and the destruction it can cause. Religion on the other hand can become corrupt, as all institutions can, or lifeless and ossified. Each of them, God and religion, has something to teach the other. The prophet Isaiah, infused with the spirit of God – he knew it. As we read in the Yom Kippur haftarah, he saw the people of his time fasting, and then wondering why God didn't give them credit for their fast and end their suffering. The people of his time were confusing God and religion. They assumed that through their practice of religious traditions, they could manipulate God to do what they wanted Him to do. Similarly, many people today assume that if they go to services, or keep kosher, or give to charity, or are good kind people – God will bless them and their loved ones in exchange with health and success. But surely by now we know that's not how it works. God isn't our puppet. God, as I've suggested, is about wonder, God is about imagination, God is about creativity, God is about wisdom. Where there is suffering in this world, it's up to us, to use all those godly capacities that we have been granted to build human structures which alleviate the suffering we experience and see all around us, as best we can.

The provocative thesis of these remarks has been that God and religion are two very different things. But far be it from me to suggest that it is impossible to find God through religion. I know there are people who experience God when they are praying in the synagogue, or observing Jewish rituals -- and why not? If some of us experience God while hiking on a mountain, or when reading poetry, absolutely God can be experienced in the midst of living a religious life. All I want to establish here is that if you are one of the people who hasn't experienced God in shul, or while performing religious rituals, that doesn't necessarily mean you have no connection to God, nor does it necessarily mean there's anything wrong with your shul or your practice. It all depends what your definition of God is, and this Yom Kippur I'm urging a more expansive definition than many of us are used to, in keeping with expansive understandings of the Divine by Jewish

mystics throughout the ages. And it also depends on what your expectations of shul are, and I'm urging a different set of expectations, based on my proposition that shuls are the center of Jewish religious life and should be judged for how well they fulfill the supremely important functions associated with religion, which – depending on the individual -- may or may not include connecting us to God.

Now back to the sufferers of what I've called Post Traumatic God Disorder. Seeing the distinction between God and religion might help us clarify the problem a bit. At least if you're feeling alienated, try to figure out what is really bothering you. That mean Hebrew school teacher in your past? Well, that's religion. If there was a shortcoming in your religious education, please, help us -- let's put our best minds together to find creative and loving ways to transmit Jewish tradition to the next generation; there are some fantastic educators out there, in all the streams of Judaism, doing just that holy work in our community, operating within real world constraints and doing great work. Boring services was your trigger? Again, that's not God's fault – liturgy is a human creation, and there are wonderful folks out there doing great things with music and poetry, helping to bring the words of ancient prayers to life for people of our generation. Prayers that say things that we just don't believe is where you get stuck? Well, the words and the metaphors and the concepts that we find in our liturgy reflect the efforts of previous generations to connect with God, with that ineffable, wondrous aspect of their lives – those efforts were then incorporated into our liturgy and became part of the official religion that we have inherited. Coming from where and when they come, it's no wonder that many of these prayers don't "work" for us, in the sense of helping us connect with God as they did for their authors. But having a common liturgy performs an important religious function, in that it brings us together with Jews across the generations and around the world. And it provides examples for our own reaching out to God in our own time, which will doubtless take very different form, using metaphors and language and ideas appropriate to the esthetic and the spiritual intuition of our generation.

If we're not feeling much wonder in our lives, let's not necessarily depend on ancient liturgies or communal institutions to fill that lack. Let's find ways to open ourselves up to be radically amazed by the many amazing things in our world, whether through meditation, doing our own writing, learning from a spiritual teacher or role model, getting out more into nature, praying -- in shul or elsewhere – whatever individual work we need to do to lift us periodically out of the everyday. Such attunement won't be handed to us in exchange for paying synagogue dues or buying High Holy Day tickets, it is rather the work of every human being. Synagogues are religious institutions, and as I've tried to show, religion is really important, and I hope you'll

continue to support the institution of the synagogue because it wouldn't exist without that support, and synagogues should be held up to the highest ethical, esthetic, and communal standards possible -- but shouldn't be expected to deliver what they were not set up to deliver. At most, institutions and their rituals can point us in the right direction in our quest for God – the rest is up to us.

A bumper sticker was once spotted which read "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." Nothing could be less Jewish. The Jewish version would be: "God said it. I believe it. Now let's sit together and figure out what it all means."¹⁰ That's the message I would like to leave you with this Yom Kippur. Think about what you do believe about God, or if you're one of those people who gets stuck on that "G" word, think about what you believe about those parts of existence which are really hard to explain – like love and joy and sadness, like compassion, and forgiveness, like ethics and free will, like art and poetry and music and imagination, like Torah, like everything that makes us more than just instinct-driven biological organisms – although even those are pretty amazing if you think about it. Talk about these things with family or friends. Share your God moments with them, God being defined broadly as I've done in these remarks. Write about these moments. Pray about them, by yourself or with others. Be inspired by them.

But also this Yom Kippur, think about religion. Think about our ancestors gathered at the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, and about the Kohen Gadol performing the rituals of this holy day. Think of the ways in which having a holy day like Yom Kippur and a holy man like the High Priest and a holy place like the Beit HaMikdash and holy practices like the fast, helped bind the people of Israel together in such a significant way, that it's hard to imagine that we would be here today as Jews without them. Think of the ways in which, after the destruction of that Temple, the rabbis had the wisdom and the faith not to give up on ancient biblical rituals, but to transform them into practices which could be observed anywhere Jews found themselves, practices which transferred the locus of energy of the day from one central figure to each individual Jew, challenging each individual to reach to the next level of goodness and generosity and ethics and commitment. Religion does so many important things -- think about the ways in which you can be a strong builder of the Jewish religious community for our own generation, and for the future.

God and religion can sometimes be in tension with each other, but they can also provide important correctives to each other, and together they can

¹⁰ Rabbi Art Green.

enrich our lives immeasurably. Finding that balance is the best cure for PTGD.

God Bless You.

Gmar Hatimah Tovah.