

Rosh Hashanah II 5782/2021

“There is Now”

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One of the great science fiction writers of the 20th century was a Yid, a Jewish boy named Isaac Asimov. One of Asimov’s most famous stories is called “The Last Question.” It was published in 1956, and in nine short pages it covers trillions of years of human history, focusing on the evolution of the relationship between human beings and computers. This story has been told and retold in different versions over the last few decades. In one distillation of the story that I particularly like, a group of scientists create an artificial intelligence system and ask it, “Is there a God?”. The AI spits out an answer: “Insufficient computing power to determine an answer.” The scientists add more computing power and ask it again, “Is there a God?” They get the same response, “insufficient computing power”. Then the scientists redouble their efforts and spend years and years improving the AI’s capacity. And then they ask it again, “Is there a God?” The AI responds, “There is now.”

I share this story with you on this, the second day of Rosh Hashanah, first because I’m a bit of a science fiction geek, but more importantly, as a way of opening up a conversation about our faith. We as Jews have inherited a particular way of thinking about God and creation. Genesis ch.1 teaches the fundamental message that God preceded us and created us **בצלם אלהים**, in God’s own image.

But in the Asimov story, God didn’t create us in God’s image. We human beings created God, in our image. I’m intrigued by this idea in that it presents a fundamental challenge to the traditional Jewish story, and I’d like to explore its implications with you today.

Of course, the notion that it is we human beings who created God is certainly not unique to Asimov. Long ago, our ancestors thought that if they collected a bunch of gold they could use it to fashion their own god to worship, in the shape of a calf. More recently, anthropologists and historians of religion have been doing empirical research on the origin of faith beliefs, situating the development of these beliefs in a particular time and context. And in very cutting edge research, neurologists have been exploring how and why our brain chemicals predispose us to belief and evolutionary biologists have been researching why such beliefs might have given homo sapiens a competitive advantage over the millions of years of our evolution. So from the ancient world until today, many people have believed in a God created by human beings for their own reasons.

And upon reflection, we can see that there are tremendous advantages to creating our own God. Because despite the somewhat sinister conclusion to the Asimov story, the God that human beings create in our image will tend to affirm everything what we already do or believe. We’ll make sure of it.

Here’s what I’m getting at. Thinking about the world of Jewish practice, if we for example like to go to shul regularly, the God that we create will affirm the importance of communal davening. If going to shul isn’t so much our thing, then the God that we create really won’t care about

stuff like that, but rather will mostly care about whether we're good, kind people. If we're into keeping the traditions of Shabbat, then our God has a whole structure of Shabbat commandments for us to organize our lives around. If we're not so into it, if we've got lots of other things we like to do on Saturdays, then perhaps our God will care only that we adopt any one of a number of different ways to rest, or to bring balance into our lives, maybe yoga, maybe the ski hill, maybe gardening, whatever. If we feel a strong sense of connection and obligation to Klal Yisrael, to the Jewish people around the world, then that will be something our God encourages or mandates. Alternatively, if we feel kind of embarrassed by Jewish particularism or by the Chosen People idea or by the State of Israel, the God that we create will say, no need to focus on this one tiny people, be a humanitarian, get active on causes of global concern, of which there are plenty.

Politically, the God that we create will conveniently espouse positions on the issues of the day that neatly line up with our own point of view on said issues.

In such a system, where we human beings create God, Judaism is shaved of all its bumps, there is no friction, no discomfort. There is no Akedat Yitzhak, the Torah reading for this morning, God commanding us to do something that we don't want to do, sacrifice something that is precious to us. In the scenario where God is our own creation, our autonomous self is rather affirmed daily, and that, naturally, feels great

By contrast, the traditional Jewish idea that there is a God external to ourselves, a God with whom we are in covenant, a God who can obligate us to do things which we as individuals might be uncomfortable with, or take exception to – that kind of faith doesn't always feel so great. In such a system, people may feel judged by their God. Their preferences and choices as individuals are not automatically affirmed. They often don't measure up. In this system, there is ongoing friction -- between us and God, between us and Jewish tradition, between us and the Jewish people.

I'm a rabbi, and this is Rosh Hashanah, so you're probably not going to be surprised to learn that I am an advocate for the traditional belief that God created us, and obligates us. But I know from speaking to many people over the years that the traditional Jewish idea about God, is experienced by many Jews in the modern world as being completely implausible, for a number of reasons. First, if there is a God who created our impossibly vast and complex universe, why should such an awesome God of supernovas and quarks be concerned with how many sets of dishes we have in our kitchens, or whether we put leather boxes on our head and arm every weekday morning?¹ Second, too many things that are ascribed to God by Jewish tradition strike many of us as being either irrelevant or downright unethical. The attitude reflected in some Jewish texts (though certainly not all) about women, LGBT people, and non-Jews, all belong in this category, and no surprise that these texts distance many people today from traditional faith. Finally, as mentioned, scientists and historians have situated the origins of the Torah and many of our rituals in their historical and cultural context, and if that's true how can they be considered eternally obligatory?

¹ David J. Wolpe, *Between Literalism and Liberalism*, Jewish Review of Books Spring 2021, p. 20.

Given all these challenges and others, what are we to do with the traditional Jewish concept of God? Maybe it'd be better to acknowledge, Asimov-like, that God was and is our own human invention?

My goal today is to observe that while the traditional Creator God may strike many as implausible, there is also a danger to letting go of this concept and replacing it, consciously or unconsciously, with a God, or a source of ultimate value, that we ourselves create. For the God that we create in our image, will inevitably conform with the mores and values of our generation. That God will generate a congenial Judaism without bumps or friction. But this Judaism, I fear, will ultimately become a platitude, with nothing particularly compelling to add to our lives as individuals and as a community. And if it is a platitude, then I worry whether it will generate the passion necessary to sustain our people in the future.

The implications of a human-created, friction-less God, are not unique to the Jewish community. The 21st century has witnessed a precipitous decline in membership in church, synagogue, and mosque in the western world. Institutional faith has become weaker in relation to other personal affiliations such as political partisanship, ethnic identity, sports, celebrity fandom, nationalism. People who might once have become priests, ministers, or rabbis are choosing to become psychologists, social workers, NGO workers, or professors instead.² Don't get me wrong, these are all noble pursuits -- of course. But for those of us who are concerned about the future of progressive religion it's a cause for concern because we know how desperately we need capable young people to choose this field, to become Jewish leaders. Instead we see many people fall into the category of what's been called SBNR -- "Spiritual but not Religious"³, this choice perhaps reflecting the question that many people ask consciously or unconsciously: if religion doesn't really have anything to add to my life, then why should I adhere to its strictures and obligations, what does it really have to do with me?

There are of course still many keeners out there, members of the Jewish community who are very passionate, and put their Jewish commitments at the very center of their lives. In our own Narayever community, I'm so grateful for you keeners and for your contributions. Whether you would say that you are motivated by a belief in God, or some other reason, without you, we literally wouldn't be here today, because we wouldn't be able to have a congregation and organize these complex services. Without you, we wouldn't be renovating our heritage building on Brunswick this year to make it accessible in keeping with our highest values. And beyond the Narayever, there are lots of amazing people doing great work in the wider Jewish community as well.

So there is lots of good news, lots of energy and vibrancy and dynamism that I'm grateful for every day. But today is Rosh Hashanah, it's Yom Din, our Day of Judgement, and this is my annual opportunity to share not just what I'm grateful for, but also some of my worries with you. My worries about the project of progressive Judaism altogether. Because for all the keeners, and all the bright spots, we know that many, many Jews are only loosely connected to the community if at all. Card-carrying, highly committed non-Orthodox Jews around the world

² Ross Douthat, "Can the Meritocracy Find God?" NYT April 11, 2021.

³ Ralph Benmergui, "Only Connect: Spirituality, Religion, and Everything in Between", TheCJN.ca

are disappearing at a faster rate than they are being replenished. Many many Jews don't perceive much that is compelling in traditional Jewish practices or beliefs or community. As thoroughly modern people, they don't find that Judaism has much to say to them. Oh sure, a family bar or bat mitzvah now and then. A wedding. Chanukah candles. High Holidays. But Judaism is not shaping the contours of their daily and weekly lives, and it's not shaping their politics either. Tikkun Olam is a great phrase. But if Tikkun Olam is deployed simply to give a Hebrew coloration to a political program that we advocate for anyway, if the idea doesn't challenge us in any particular way, if nothing about it makes us in any way uncomfortable, then how much is it really adding?

Those of you who have listened to me over the years know that I'm a pretty liberal guy (small "l"). You name an issue of the day, and my position will likely line up pretty well with the general progressive consensus. My politics, like all of ours, has been shaped by all kinds of factors in my background – my family, my gender, my age, where I grew up, my educational attainments, my socioeconomic status, maybe a bit of my own thinking as well – and it's all landed me where I am on the political spectrum, no surprise really given all the factors.

But I don't want my God to be the God that I created. I want to be challenged by my God and by my Judaism. So when it comes to some of the very weighty issues that face us in society -- about the beginning and end of life, for example, I am open to hearing a voice in Jewish tradition that is not entirely consistent with the progressive faith in the utter autonomy of the individual to make decisions about their own bodies. When it comes to Jewish ethnic solidarity and issues around Zionism and Israel, I am open to hearing a voice within my tradition that calls us to a special connection to and sympathy for Jews around the world, a conviction that is not entirely consistent with a progressive faith in universalism. When it comes to technology, I feel Jewishly compelled to find ways to resist, push back against the ever-more dominating role that our extraordinarily powerful if not yet godlike gadgets and devices play in our lives. When it comes to how we live our day-to-day lives, I am open to a voice from within our tradition which claims that the God of supernovas and black holes does actually care what we eat, whether we sit shiva and recite kaddish for our loved ones who have died, whether we wave a lulav and etrog on Sukkot, whether we put on tefillin or circumcise our sons.

Jewish tradition has things to say to us which are counter-cultural, and I would like us to try and listen, even if some of those things make us uncomfortable. Jewish tradition contains many varied ideas and obligations which seem strange, implausible, not in keeping with contemporary attitudes about the human body or about society. Do we have to embrace them all? No. Non-orthodox Judaism has had good instincts about areas where we need to help our tradition to change and evolve. Narayever was a pioneer in that evolution in regard to gender roles, and I'm proud of that; we all should be. But as we shape our Judaism to be consistent with our values, let's also allow our Judaism to shape us. In order to do so, our Judaism has to be thick, not thin. It has to merit more than a periodic nostalgic nod of appreciation. It has to challenge us. The hard parts of Jewish life and faith may complicate the sales pitch⁴ for people in my line of work. Nobody likes to feel that their own personal choices are being judged. But

⁴ McKay Coppins "How Mormons Became American", The Atlantic, Jan-Feb 2021.

discomfort is inevitable, unless of course we create our own God, which responds as it's been programmed by us to respond. But it's those hard parts, those inconvenient parts, those sometimes-embarrassing parts, the parts which we would never have programmed in, which I often find to be the most meaningful and worthwhile.

Listening for the commanding voice – that's called faith. It comes from a thick Judaism, one that obligates us. A Judaism that has a seriousness of purpose, a Judaism that challenges us with deep moral questions and dilemmas. Not a fundamentalist, one-size-fits-all conformist religion which denies all scope for individual freedom and choice, no. But also not a human-created religion which simply affirms who we already are and what we already do – one which is generically humanitarian⁵ and based entirely on individual self-directed choice. Such a religion may be respectable, but it is also benign, tame, and easy to ignore.

I know that the pull of a richly lived Jewish life is not for everyone. Those who opt out certainly have the right to do so. When it happens I feel badly, but I also wonder, is religion always to blame when it loses an adherent?⁶ Must religion change to accommodate everyone's personal preference, so as to keep as many people as possible within the fold? I know we live in a diverse marketplace of identities – national, racial, sexual, political, etc., and for some the allure of those other identities will be stronger. Given how many choices there are out there, I'm actually thrilled that so many Jews still opt in. But not surprisingly for a rabbi I suppose, I'm greedy -- I hope more will make that choice in the future.

I firmly believe that religion is like a fitness program – a workout regimen. It's hard, and missing class is really not an option if you want to get into shape.⁷ How much do I as a rabbi affirm individual choice and freedom, making everybody feel included no matter what their personal choices, and how much do I push the message that while everyone is welcome, it is actually vital for all of us to get into shape?

I opened with a science fiction story written some 60 years ago. I'd like to begin to close with a story from the Midrash written more than 1500 years ago. It's a Midrash about Creation from a work called Pirkei deRabbi Eliezer. In this rabbinic story, on the 6th day when Adam was created, all the other creatures in the Garden of Eden saw him and became afraid of him, thinking that he was their Creator, and they came to prostrate themselves before him. Adam said to them: What (is this), ye creatures! Why are ye come to prostrate yourselves before me? **בואו אני ואתם** Come, I and you, let us go and adorn in majesty and might, and acclaim as King over us, the One who created us.

I hear such a powerful Rosh Hashanah message in this teaching, a message that we are not in fact God. This is a teaching about Avinu Malkenu, our father our King who brought us into being and obligates us -- ritually, politically, socially – who wants us to be strong Jews, committed

⁵ Ross Douthat "Joe Biden's Catholic Moment", NYT Jan.23, 2021.

⁶ Yehuda Kurtzer, "Hanukkah Marks the Complexities of Assimilation and Syncretism Faced by American Jews" Religion Dispatches, Dec.11, 2020.

⁷ Metaphor suggested by Rabbi Jordan Cohen in Ralph Benmergui article in TheCJN.ca.

Jews, passionate kind and generous Jews of integrity, Jews who are prepared to listen for the voice of tradition, and together acclaim as Sovereign the One who created us.

I close with a short but haunting poem by Drew Dellinger: “It’s 3:23 in the morning/and I can’t sleep/because my great- great-grandchildren/ask me in dreams/what did you do while the earth was unravelling?”

When we hear these words, we may automatically think of the climate crisis and indeed we should all be frightened as we consider some of the scenarios that await our descendants if we keep pumping carbon into the atmosphere at the rate we’ve been doing for the last hundred years. But when I read this poem, I think of our little Jewish world as well, where my particular position imposes some extra responsibility to use whatever meagre skills I’ve got to keep things from unravelling, to help as many Jews as possible be good Jewish ancestors⁸ to their great-great-grandchildren.

We can only be strong Jewish ancestors if Judaism plays a strong role in our lives. Judaism will only play a strong role in our lives if we allow it to, if we allow it to make demands of us, to challenge us as we are. If we ramp up our commitment and our practice and our engagement with Jewish sources and with the Jewish people and with God. Not the God that we have created, but the God who created us.

⁸ Roman Krznaric *The Good Ancestor: A Radical Prescription for Long-Term Thinking*, 2020.