

Yom Kippur Sermon 5780

Rabbi Yonatan Sadoff

In a mother's womb were two babies. One asked the other: "Do you believe in life after delivery?" The other replied, "Why, of course. There has to be something after delivery. Maybe we are here to prepare ourselves for what we will be later."

"Nonsense," said the first. "There is no life after delivery. What kind of life would that be?"

The second said, "I don't know, but there will be more light than here. Maybe we will walk with our legs and eat from our mouths. Maybe we will have other senses that we can't understand now."

The first replied, "That is absurd. Walking is impossible. And eating with our mouths? Ridiculous! The umbilical cord supplies nutrition and everything we need. But the umbilical cord is so short. Life after delivery is to be logically excluded."

The second insisted, "Well I think there is something and maybe it's different than it is here. Maybe we won't need this physical cord anymore."

The first replied, "Nonsense. And moreover, if there is life, then why has no one ever come back from there? Delivery is the end of life, and in the after-delivery, there is nothing but darkness and silence and oblivion. It takes us nowhere."

"Well, I don't know," said the second, "but certainly we will meet Mother and she will take care of us."

The first replied “Mother? You actually believe in Mother? That’s laughable. If Mother exists then where is She now?”

The second said, “She is all around us. We are surrounded by her. We are of Her. It is in Her that we live. Without Her, this world would not and could not exist.”

Said the first: “Well I don’t see Her, so it is only logical that She doesn’t exist.”

To which the second replied, “Sometimes, when you’re in silence and you focus and listen, you can perceive Her presence, and you can hear Her loving voice, calling down from above.”

– From: *Your Sacred Self* by Dr. Wayne Dyerill

On Rosh Hashanah, my sermon centered around the subject of belief and faith. I spoke about how belief and faith are feelings of absolute certainty in our inner lives, even when the external world offers no justification for such certainty. But how do we maintain that faith when tragedy visits our doorstep?

Our personal and collective faith has been shaken by the Holocaust and the losses it entailed. The problem of evil in the world is not limited to the Holocaust; it can be perceived in any personal tragedy; the loss of a child or loved one, for example. For those who believe in God or want to believe in God, how do we answer the impossible question? How can God, allow a child to die of cancer, allow the Holocaust to happen or a Synagogue or

Church massacre to take place, to name just a few of the terrible events that have touched our lives, our world?

The statistics about belief in God, you should know, are pretty dismal (at least in the Diaspora). It seems that the majority of Jews do not believe in God or think that belief in God is important. Only about 40% of American Jews reported believing in God, according to a Pew study done in 2010. According to the Gen 17 study done by Monash Uni, the situation here in Australia is not much better than in America. Only 46% of Australian Jews rated belief in God as being important to being Jewish. 98% of Haredi Jews here said that belief in God is important, but only 58% of Modern Orthodox Jews, 25% of Masorti Jews and 5% of secular Jews. Though the Australian survey asked about the importance of the belief in God to being Jewish rather than belief in God itself, we can only deduce that belief in God is not central to Jewish faith for most Australian Jews. It is, however, interesting that most Jews in Israel do believe in God – about 80%, including about half of those who consider themselves secular! Some may find this comforting, I find it concerning! The establishment of the modern State of Israel is nothing less than miraculous and, though we have seen many tragedies in the last 70 years since its birth, we have mostly seen a series of victories and unfathomable achievements against all odds. What will happen to the state of faith in Israel, if God forbid, something terrible happens? How might Israelis, or any of us, feel and would their faith be affected?

My hope is that the statistics do not tell the whole story. How could that be? Well, first of all, what do Jews mean when they say they don't believe in God? Perhaps what most Jews mean when they say they do not believe in God, is that they don't believe in the God that they grew up with. They don't believe in the God they were taught about in Hebrew School or sitting in the pews of the Synagogue. Is there another God?

First, who is the God we grew up with? Let's find out by a show of hands:

How many of you grew up with the God that would strike you down with lightning if you were bad? How many of you were taught that the God of Israel is omnipotent - meaning all-powerful? Was it a God that rewards and punishes? How about omniscient, was that God all-knowing? What about perfect and unchanging? Let's call that God (pause) "**Super-God**"; all-powerful and all knowing, controlling everything in the world! Rewarding the good and punishing the bad. That God can be pretty scary!

Now, raise your hand if you were taught that the Jewish God is a God who loves and needs you? Could that God of Israel make a mistake? Did you grow up with a God who could grow and change? and even understand us better with time? Could that God of Israel change or be persuaded by us? Did you grow up with the concept of a God who lives in intimate relationship with us and makes us partners in creation? Let us call this "the God of Becoming and Relationship."

I had a sense that the God most of us were brought up with was Super God. Super-God is the all-powerful, all-knowing, unchanging/perfect God. But when things go badly in the world or in our lives, Super-God becomes a problem for us, that is theologically, meaning what we believe about how God functions or interacts with the world.

Why does Super-God, the all-powerful, all-knowing God cause an insurmountable challenge to our faith? Well, as Harold Kushner, the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, points out that, “A God of [infinite] Power extorts obedience but cannot command love. A God who could spare the life of a dying child, who could prevent the earthquake but chooses not to, may inspire our fear and our calculated obedience, but does not deserve our love.” Super-God cannot comfort us in our darkest times because Super-God is the one to blame! Maybe it is time to consider putting our faith in what Rabbi Artson, my rabbi and the Dean of the Ziegler Rabbinical School in LA, calls “the God of Becoming and Relationship”; we can refer to this God as “Relationship God” for short. [Like Relationship George for the Seinfeld fans] Maybe “Relationship God” isn’t all powerful or perfect, but loves us and desires to work with us and through us in order to help us navigate our way through this very complicated world. Artson challenges our basic assumptions about what we believe in God, writing: “Based on the presumption [that God is omnipotent], God must have all the power. For God to be omnipotent implies that no power exists that is not God’s which means...that any occurrence is God’s responsibility...God

gets credit for anything good in life; for anything bad in life, God gets the blame.”

So you might be thinking—”Wait a second, Rabbi, back up a minute. You can’t just trade in our All-Powerful God of our 4,000-year history for some new hybrid model”. This begs the question: Is Super-God, the all-powerful and all-knowing, unchanging and perfect God the irrefutably authentic God of the Bible? It is important to understand that these beliefs about and omnipotent and omniscient God originated in Greek philosophy and only made their way into our religious beliefs in the Middle Ages; only 800 years ago or so! The medieval Jewish philosophers, Maimonides, Saadia Gaon and Yehudah Halevi, for example, made it their life’s project to synthesize the God of Aristotle with the God of Israel. They believed that the God of Judaism and Aristotle were the same God! They believed in this philosophy as we might believe in science today.

The hymn “Yigdal”, for example, is based on the 13 Articles of Faith formulated by Maimonides.

הנו אֲדוֹן עוֹלָם לְכֹל (וְכָל) נוֹצֵר. He is the master of the world and to every creature

צוּפָה וְיוֹדֵעַ סִתְּרוֹנוֹ

מִבֵּיט לְסוֹף דָּבָר בְּקִדְמָתוֹ: God sees and knows every hidden thing, perceives a matter’s outcome at its inception

In his book, *The God of Relationship and Becoming*, Rabbi Artson presents an idea called *Process Theology*, where the image or metaphor of God is a God working in the world via a connection with us. This God is not all-knowing or all-powerful similar to what Kushnir had written 40 years earlier. Artson develops this idea further portraying an image of God that is dynamic, changing, imperfect as illustrated in the Torah and rabbinic sources. In his conception, God is dynamic, the world is dynamic and the covenant is dynamic. This God is in process with us and through relationship with us in the world.

“Process thinking can open our eyes to a God who is relational and loving. The Prophet of Old, Chagai, understood this when he said, ‘I am with you declares the Holy One’. I am with you is so different from the coercive God we fear. In this conception, we are partners with God and all existence, in a process of becoming and this happens through the power of influence.

The key to understanding Rabbi Artson’s view is that all is not pre-determined and controlled by God, but rather that our relationship with God is always evolving and in a continual state of what Rabbi Artson describes as “becoming” ...**we change and God changes**---but how can we understand this idea tachlis, that is, practically? Perhaps think of God as a divine GPS (Global Positioning System)...God’s love persuades us to live righteously, honestly, justly and lovingly—“You encounter another person asking for money, give them a little tzedaka!” Says the Divine GPS. But you decide not to, you say, “oh the stop light is about to turn green, no

time now”. God doesn’t punish you for choosing this path but simply says.... “recalculating”. Now the next time you pass someone in need, God (the Divine GPS) will say, “give that person some *tzedaka*” and this time perhaps you are moved to do so! In this way, God is not coercive but persuasive, and offers us insights that will lead us to live a holier life; to be a better person. Whatever choice we make, God is right there with us, to guide us towards our higher selves.

Of course this partnership is not exactly on an equal footing, God still holds a higher, divine position; but love is the central element shared among us, and through this love both God and human beings evolve.

Well, maybe you’re thinking, this God sounds good, but you still have not explained how we can reconcile this new “Relationship God” with the God of the Torah? I briefly mentioned that we have been indoctrinated to believe that the God of Greek philosophy is the God of the Torah...so when we read our own Jewish texts, we read them through this lens of the omniscient, omnipotent God of Greek philosophy (Aristotle)... (and we do it without even realizing it)! If we become aware of this assumption, we may be able to observe that this is not necessarily the God presented in the Torah! Certainly, we will find instances of God’s anger and retribution in the Torah, but I am not sure we ever see an omnipotent or all-powerful God---what we do find is a God who is limited, who grows and changes and, very significantly, is dependent upon a relationship with us in order to work in the world- that is “Relationship God”!

Let us look at examples of Relationship God-- the dynamic, changing, learning, feeling God of the Bible.

Take Noah, for example. God tells Noah after the flood: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man since the inclinations of his mind are evil from his youth; nor again will I destroy all life.” [Gen. 9:11] God will not destroy the world again because God realizes something about his creatures, they don’t always do the right and the good. God regrets a prior decision to destroy the world and rethinks how to act in relation to human beings in the future as God gets to know and understand us better. This culminates in God entering into a relationship, a covenant of Peace with Noah (the Rainbow being the sign)—that is not only the sign that God will not destroy the world again, but also that God has “evolved” and resolves to create a covenant, yes-an agreement- but also a relationship with human beings.

Abraham is another great example. Was Abraham’s God omnipotent and distant? We recall his conversations and arguments with God; I am sure that you remember the story of Sodom and Gomora. God said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do ... for I have singled him out, that he may teach his children”. Then Abraham convinced God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gemora if there will be only 10 good people there and God agreed. Yes, God loved Abraham and was his partner; not equals, but Abraham was God’s partner, God calls him, “Avraham ahuvi”, my beloved

Abraham. Like Abraham, we too, are loved by God and are God's partners in the maintenance and ongoing creation and recreation of the world.

The primary example of Relationship God, the God that relates to us, that works **in/with and through us** in the Torah is in the case of Moses. In Exodus chapter 3 God says to Moses at the burning bush, "I have certainly seen the suffering of my people and heard their cries on account of their taskmasters." [Exodus 3:7] This raises the question, why then, did God wait hundreds of years to redeem our People from Egypt? The Torah says that God saw our suffering, right? Could it be that God did not have the capability to redeem the People on God's own? Could it be that God, too, needed a partner for that mission? Is it possible that God needed Moses in order to redeem the people? We certainly know that Moses could not have freed the Jewish People without God, but why does God not save the People until Moses agrees to go as his emissary? We might entertain the possibility that God was not independently capable of freeing the People without Moses; Moses was God's conduit to be able to come into the world and deliver our People—the redemption comes from God, but in partnership with and through Moses. According to this understanding of "relationship God," ---the way that God works is not by acting upon us, but rather--- **with us, in us and through us.** We are the vehicle that brings God's healing and power into the world. We can't be that vehicle without the fuel, and **that energy is God!**

When we find Moses at the burning bush, we find a run-away fugitive; a person not only running from Pharaoh's wrath, but on a deeper level, an individual hiding from their true mission in the world. God said to Moses, "Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people, the Israelites from Egypt." [Exodus 3:10]

But the Torah isn't only speaking to Moses, it is speaking to us. Today too, we need to find out how God needs us to help deliver and save the world from all of the very difficult challenges that we are facing. God needs each one of us!

We can't do it alone, nor can God. We must do it together, in a loving relationship where God is the source of all energy and creativity, a living, loving, engaged power in our lives. The metaphor might be that we are the wire and God is the electricity---when we open our eyes, hearts and souls to this possibility, we can become a live wire for God in the world. We can bring infinite holiness, light, healing and repair when we live with God in the loving relationship of covenant.

How does it work? We become God's partner when we do mitzvot. Every time we do a mitzvah, we connect to God and bring holiness into the world. When we do a mitzvah, we become that live wire that allows God to work **with / in and through us**. When you say the blessing over bread, for example, you say, blessed is God who brings forth bread from the ground, but bread doesn't grow from the ground? Why is this? Because we bless

God not only for the ingredients for bread, but for making us partners in making that bread; for being God's partners in maintaining creation. That is why the hamotzi is considered the highest of all blessings over food and covers anything else we may eat afterward. How can you become the wire that conducts the electricity of the Holy One and be God's partner? When you do everything you can to be a steward to the Garden, the world that God gave us, preserve and protect the environment. When you feed a hungry child or any human being at the Food Van or Mazon, you bring God's holiness and compassion into the world. When you light Shabbat candles--you make time for a relationship with God and holiness; you bring God's light into the world. When you visit the sick and suffering, you bring God into the world. When you are conscious of what you eat by keeping kosher or grateful for what you eat by making a blessing, you bring God into the world. When you visit and support Israel, you bring God into the world. When you come to Wednesday morning minyan to pray and ensure that there is a minyan for Mourners, you bring God into the world. When you reach into your pocket to give *tzedaka*, even when it is hard, you bring God into the world. Mitzvot done with the intention of being God's partner in bringing kindness, holiness and goodness into the world are not a burden but an expression of love and relationship. When we work together, we bring God into the world.

My prayer for all of us on this Rosh Hashanah is that we can all find comfort and hope in God, that each one of us will hear God luring us back to a sense of mission, of *tikun olam bmalchut shadai*, repairing a broken

world under the sovereignty of Shadai, the God of loving-kindness, so that God can work with us, in us and through us.

Shanah Tovah