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Rosh Hashanah Morning Sermon 5776  
September 14, 2015

I was only 21 when I applied to rabbinical school, and it's fair to say I had no idea what I was doing or what I was in for. My grades and GRE scores and recommendations were all fine. And I thought that my essays were okay – but the night before my interview I realized that the interview committee was probably going to ask me about....God, and I had forgotten to write about God.

Well, it wasn't that I forgot – I just chose to dodge the issue. I mean, I didn't really know what I believed or what to say.

I wasn't mad at God or anything like that. Just sort of avoidant.

But then I realized that the interview committee was probably going to bring it up.

So I crammed.

I read the chapter about God in *Exploring Judaism: A Reconstructionist Approach* (which is sort of the cliff notes of Reconstructionist thought). I took notes, I reviewed them, I repeated the progression of theologies that Reconstructionists liked to talk about back then: supernaturalism, naturalism, transnaturalism, predicate theology, feminist theology.

I got them down.

And go figure, when I was sitting around the table with the six members of my interview committee the next day, they did ask me what I believed about God. I was ready: supernaturalism, naturalism, transnaturalism, predicate theology, feminist theology.

I covered the last fifty years of Reconstructionist thought straight from the book.

They weren't pleased.

But they let me in anyway. They understood what many of us understand. You can lead a full Jewish life without ever much discussing or even thinking about God. I mean, God is everywhere in the liturgy, but the prayers are in Hebrew, and when many of us sing them it's more about being in community and connecting to Jewish tradition, not about *God*, or even the deepest meaning of the prayer itself.

I guess it shouldn't be surprising that my pastor friends are mortified when I explain to them that God was never much a part of my decision to become a rabbi. Judaism for me was about community, culture, ritual, and justice. It was about incorporating an ancient tradition into one's life, drawing inspiration from Jewish history, politics, and values. It was about continually reinvigorating Jewish life so it's more compelling and vibrant, so that Judaism would break free

from those stodgy, monotonous, mid-twentieth century notions of keeping-up-with-the-Jones', trying-to-assimilate-into-Christian-suburbia, and building bigger and bigger buildings.

But back to rabbinical school. I loved rabbinical school.

My teachers taught me how to think and take risks, they opened my eyes to a wealth of Jewish texts, they challenged me to be creative with ritual, and they expanded my ideas of Judaism and social justice.

But, then there was this issue about God, and my lack of passion about God.

The thing is, they might let you into rabbinical school if you have nothing to say about God, but they're not going to let you out.

They sent me to what's called "spiritual direction."

For more years than I can recall, I sat in a quiet room with a rabbi, for an hour, every month, and talked about God.

It was terrifying and awkward all at the same time.

Now spiritual direction is a wonderful thing, and it's quite a privilege to have someone listen to your most challenging spiritual issues and gently prod you to reflect and clarify and discern and go deeper.

But it's not my cup of tea.

Then one summer I did a clinical pastoral education program, otherwise known as CPE. It's a really intensive chaplaincy training program held at a local hospital, which combines patient spiritual care visits, one-on-one reflection, group process, theological exploration papers, and overnight coverage of the hospital for pastoral care emergencies. I was with five other students – three were Lutherans and two were Presbyterians. Our supervisor was a very quiet Dutch Reform minister.

Talk about talking about God! These people talked about God all the time. Prayers just flew out of their mouths. They integrated their feelings, experiences, and theology so casually and naturally, like they really believed what they were saying.

We were at an inner-city hospital in West Philadelphia. Less than three percent of the patients were Jewish. My Hebrew misheberach prayers did not serve me well.

The hospital was a rough place. I had never been exposed to gunshot wounds and stabbings before. I had never been so close to other people's blood before, and it was everywhere.

Once a week, one of us would spend the night at the hospital. The pager could buzz ten times over the nightly shift. Our job was to call family members and tell them that their loved ones were at the hospital, pick up the pieces when doctors delivered bad news, and pray – a lot.

The next morning we would come together for a meeting, and the person on call would report about what had happened. The well-rested chaplains would ask, “How did that make you feel?” and “You seem distressed. Would now be a good time to address your relationship with God?” And “Tell us how that patient reminded you of your father.”

I came to love the other five chaplains. Surrounded by the heaviness of death, dying, and violence we found humor, sincerity, and joy. I could have done without a lot of the chaplain-speak, but these chaplains were good, solid people who pushed me past my cynicism, who helped me find my own authentic words, who helped me be less afraid to go to some very dark places.

I think I needed to surround myself with Presbyterians and Lutherans to come to terms with what God actually meant to me.

In my last semester of rabbinical school we had to present a paper to our classmates about our spiritual journey. I drew heavily from my experiences doing chaplaincy. I still remember, though, what my friend, Rena, asked me: “But what do you believe about God when blood is not spattering on the walls?”

It’s a good question. She knew I found it easiest to talk about God in the intensity of the hospital, in that liminal space between life and death, in the presence of fear and suffering and hopelessness, when God’s presence felt authentic and real.

God wasn’t an old man shaking his finger, commanding me to uphold an antiquated, authoritarian set of principles.

God was a force of compassion and healing.

God was in the encounter between two people who desperately needed each other.

God was a source of comfort in the presence of illness and death.

God was in the painful departure as life passed into death.

God dwelled in the emptiness.

I felt God in each room I visited. God was there with a man who had been shot too many times to ever regain consciousness. God was there with a mother whose son had cancer in his heart. God was there at the bedside of the teenager who had just given birth all alone, with no friends or family or partner to care for her.

God was in and part of all those experiences.

I never much cared about what God was or wasn’t. For me that was sort of beside the point, an interesting conversation maybe, but not terribly relevant. It was more about discerning God’s presence, and understanding that in the midst of suffering we are not all alone.

But it's not that straightforward. This way of thinking about God is not easily reflected in our traditional Biblical texts. God is vengeful and jealous and violent. Not always, but enough to make believing in God really unappealing.

And it's not just that God is vengeful and jealous and violent. God is the main actor in texts that advocate genocide. The Bible is full of texts that place a high value on obedience to authority, oppression of women, and destroying your enemies.

God might be portrayed as merciful at times, but God's love for us is deeply conditional – it comes with the requirement of an almost blind adherence to God's law.

I could try to sugar-coat it – I mean I feel like so much of my job is being a cheerleader for Judaism. But it's kind of hard to do when we confront these texts. The thing is, I'm not terribly bothered by them. They were written thousands of years ago by a desert-dwelling people who had a totally different set of experiences, who reflected a totally different sensibility of the sacred. These were *their* stories, *their* quest to make sense of that very different world they lived in.

What I am bothered by is how we use – and misuse – these texts today. We are trapped by a notion that this Biblical God has to be *our* God. So we avoid these texts, or ignore them, or try to justify them. We're desperate for something more inspiring.

I don't find the Hebrew Bible in and of itself to be that inspiring – and I know that I'm not supposed to say that but it's true. I think we ask too much of the Bible – why should our Jewish identity hinge on these ancient texts that reflect somebody else's spiritual problems?

What I do find inspiring are the ways that we confront these texts week after week, year after year, and that we as a people have done this for thousands of years. It's the struggle with the text that I like. I find the stories that have been written over the centuries about the Hebrew Bible much more interesting. I have fallen in love with the Talmudic rabbis, the medieval commentators, the modern philosophers, and the feminist midrashists.

They find the inconsistencies and challenge the texts, flip them on their head, and even undermine them. They can be subversive and satirical, moving and poignant.

They allow us to talk about what's real in our world because *genocide does still exist*, as does misogyny and religious persecution. They force us to challenge our own assumptions and refuse to overlook minority perspectives. They help us to see our world in new ways and hold ourselves accountable for our own actions.

They help us to address our own failings – as a society, as a community, and as individuals.

The generations of people who have struggled with our texts can inspire us to work for justice. They can ground us in a tradition that is comprised of many, many voices. They warn us of the dangers of dogma – any dogma – by prodding us to ask difficult questions and to be dissatisfied with easy answers.

The generations of people who have struggled with our texts also struggled with God. In the Bible, God may be vengeful and jealous and violent, but people's perception of God changes in every generation because they change – they are confronted by new ideas and experience new challenges. So too with us – it's our task is to imagine a God who speaks to the world that we live in.

The poet Alicia Suskin Ostriker writes that we need God to help us survive the nuclear age. She reminds me that in our generation we will destroy ourselves and everything we love if we forget that our lives are deeply interconnected with one another. We need God to help us survive ourselves, our capacity to wreak so much destruction upon others.

She reminds me that I don't only believe in a comforting God in the hospital who dwells in the midst of suffering, but also a God of justice.

It's a God who wants us to survive, and thrive, and figure out a way to make our world more sustainable, and more fair, with resources allocated more equitably. It's a God who wants the poor to be treated with respect and dignity.

Or maybe this isn't a God who *wants* anything. Maybe God is simply a sense of holiness that comes from a deep understanding that each person deserves to live a life free from hunger and poverty, that each person deserves to drink clean water and breathe clean air, that each person deserves to dwell in a home that is safe and secure, without the threat of violence.

Now I don't think that believing in God makes you a better person. I don't think believing in God necessarily makes you more compassionate or better able to work for justice. I don't think believing in God necessarily makes you better able to cope with life's challenges.

I don't really care if you believe in God – and maybe I'm not supposed to say that either – because it is possible to live a meaningful Jewish life and make the world a better place and live a fulfilling and whole life without really considering God or our relationship to God.

But I do think it's worth at least exploring faith, belief, spirituality, mindfulness, awe, and a sense of the sacred. I think cultivating a spiritual life is important. Developing an ability to be present to unbearable pain, to be present to other people's suffering *does* make us more compassionate and better able to work for justice. Developing an ability to be present to heartache and loss *does* make us better able to cope with life's challenges and to find comfort in the midst of sorrow.

Cultivating a spiritual life is one core part of being Jewish. It is one part of how we construct our Jewish lives, how we build joyful communities, how we integrate Jewish practice, ritual, and culture into our daily routines.

Cultivating a spiritual life is about giving expression to our questions and experiences and using those to create a Jewish identity that makes sense in our world.

I believe that the greatest threat to Judaism is that we let it become dull, that we let it get stuck in the ideas of the past, that we don't reflect our *own* questions and experiences through it.

I believe that our collective Jewish future is in jeopardy if our Jewish identities are built on other people's questions and experiences. If they are built only on nostalgia for our grandparents' past – even if it never really existed. If they are built only on a responsibility to the persecuted generations of our past – they died for Judaism, the least we can do is join a synagogue. If they are built only on guilt – we've let down our parents for marrying someone not Jewish, we're bad parents if our own kids don't have a bar or bat mitzvah, we're bad Jews because we don't really want to sit through a four hour service.

This is no way to build a meaningful Jewish identity or a joyful community. It's doomed from the beginning because our Judaism is based on something we think we owe to someone else.

We have to find something inherently compelling about Judaism or Jewishness, about Jewish ritual or practice or culture. One place to begin is by cultivating a spiritual life, by finding and creating purpose in the midst of our turbulent, unpredictable world.

I believe that it's possible. But I also believe it's difficult. And that's how it should be, because cultivating a spiritual life and grounding our work for justice in Jewish ideas and texts and building joyful communities and breathing new life into ancient rituals requires that we use our hearts and minds, that we be solitary and communal, that we speak and listen, that we share our experiences and learn from others.

In this new year, may we explore our own faith, belief, spirituality, mindfulness, awe, and a sense of the sacred. May we reflect on and give voice to our struggles – and the struggles of others. May we be present to pain, suffering, heartache, and loss. May we construct a Jewish identity that's grounded in the ideas of our ancestors but infused with our own questions and experiences.

L'shanah tovah – may it be a good year.