

LET THE MYSTERY BE

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Yom Kippur Morning 5772 / 2011

I want to talk about God today. I'm not going to tell you that I know that God exists, because I don't. I *believe* in God. That's all. I can't prove that God exists. I don't even want to try. It takes too much energy and I always fail. I'm not sure I can even tell you what it is I believe about God. I believe that God brought the universe into being. I believe that our existence as human beings is not the result of randomness. I believe that there is a Divine imperative that calls to each of us. That's about it. God exists. We're not here by accident. And our existence has meaning. Beyond that it starts to get hazy.

But that's not what I want to talk about, anyway. Each of us carries our own personal theology, our own *weltanschauung*, our own personal world-view. For most of us it was developed when we were children, probably before puberty. Some of us refined it in our high-school and college years. A few of us continue to work on it. Regardless, the thing to keep in mind is that no matter what we think about God, it says more about us than it does about the nature of God. Put another way, if someone comes up to you and says that they know God, you can rest assured that they're wrong. And that includes me.

Maimonides, the great Jewish theologian and philosopher of the 12th century, embraced the *Via Negativa* which says that the only thing you can say about God is that you can't say anything about God. In other words, God (and let me point out that's not really God's name, it's just the word we use to refer to Whoever or Whatever) is a mystery. Actually, for me, maybe that should be the name we use for You-Know-Who: Mystery. I know nothing *about* God. I just believe *in* God.

But that's not what I want to talk about either. The way I look at it, you've all pretty much got your minds made up. Either you believe or you don't. And that's okay. Because it works for you. (Judaism has never made faith an absolute requirement for membership in the tribe. Ours has always been a "deed over creed" religion. We're more into bottom-line results. Judaism doesn't care so much what it is you believe, as long as you do what you're supposed to do.) But by the same token, even if you're a card-carrying atheist, even if you place God into the same category with heavy-set white-bearded men wearing red jump-suits and riding through the skies in reindeer-driven sleighs, even if you're a cynic or a skeptic, you can't avoid God. God shows up just about everywhere. When we're angry and in moments of ecstasy, when we're in houses of worship and the great temples of sport, God gets invoked a lot. Even by atheists. Especially in the proverbial foxhole.

The problem, however, is that for most of us, irrespective our individual religious inclinations, we labor with notions of God that are, in my humble opinion, archaic, simplistic, childish, and misguided. Whether we think of God as an old man with a white beard sitting on a rocking chair perusing through that hefty Book of Life, or as a Being who compassionately watches over us (except when it seems like He doesn't), whether we imagine God as the One who causes waters to part and hands down stone tablets atop cloud-covered mountains, my sense is that such "imaginings" are, by and large, unwieldy and unusable in our modern, challenge-filled lives. In other words, the notions we employ for God simply don't work anymore.

So today I'd like to offer you what I think is at the core of how Judaism suggests we should conceptualize God. And this is not to suggest that this is the right way. Remember, God is (I'm pretty sure) unknowable. Put another way, I am not so presumptuous as to say that the way we Jews view the Holy is any better, any more accurate than any other religious or spiritual view. And yet I think it's worthwhile, even important, for us to understand how it is that Judaism views God. While this certainly won't be comprehensive or authoritative, I think I can offer to you a fairly clear notion of how Judaism, and in particular through the lens of our core document, the Bible, would have us think about God. To be sure, we must be ever aware of the difference between how we think about something and its actual nature. This is just the approach of one tradition. But it is our tradition.

This morning I will be examining three texts from the Hebrew Bible. I don't mean to suggest that they are, in and of themselves, comprehensive or authoritative. The Bible is a compendium, a mish-mash, at times even self-contradictory; it is a cumulative reflection of its people who were also trying to sort out the God-thing. And while I will certainly be guilty of being selective (and equally so of the texts I exclude), what I have chosen are, I think, at the very core of what will develop into what we now identify as Judaism. Even more, they are timeless. They work in all generations.

One more thing. I don't know if our ancestors experienced the Holy the way they wrote they did. I don't know if the seminal experience at the sea or at the foot of the mountain happened. I don't know if they actually heard or saw things as reported in the Bible. But I know that they believed what they wrote. And I know that their notions of God and our relationship to God were unprecedented in human history, and that their insights were beyond intriguing, they were and remain extraordinary. Worthy. Sacred. These are three of the stories they bequeathed to us.

The Name of God

I so wish we could do away with the word "God". No doubt a la Shakespeare – "a rose by another name would smell as sweet" – it doesn't really matter. Whatever name we'd have chosen would be as equally insufficient. Still, the word "God" seems to be so lacking in meaning. It's just a word. It tells us nothing. Now in Hebrew there are two essential words that emerge from the Bible: *Elohim*, the more generic term (from which the Islamic name for God, *Allah*, is derived), and *Adonai*, which as most know is really a pseudonym for YHVH (which we're not supposed to pronounce). The primary text for that latter name comes from the third chapter of Exodus.

Here's Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro when he notices a bush that burns but isn't being consumed. Then the bush talks. (We can save the part about the miracle of the non-burning-talking bush for a Shabbos morning Torah discussion.) What I would like to focus on is what the bush (which, of course, is God) says to Moses after Moses asks the Voice its name. And it's a fair question. "When I go back to the Israelites and tell them about this, how shall I identify you?" (This is a paraphrase of the text in Exodus.) The Voice replies: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*. Literally, "I will be what I will be." (Or as some older translations have rendered it, a la Popeye: "I am that I am".) Put another way, if we are to learn anything from the Torah's name for the God of Israel, the word the Torah uses – *Ehyeh* (which is a form of the tetragrammaton, the four-letter name YHVH) – implies nothing more than "existence". There's no suggestion here of Almighty, Creator, or Redeemer. There's no mention of God's powers or abilities. The name is simply "I am". Or "I can be whatever I want to be".

Joel Hoffman, one of the Jewish world's foremost teachers of the origins of the Hebrew language who was our scholar-in-residence a couple of years ago, has taught that the great invention of ancient Israel was not so much monotheism but the addition of vowel letters to the Phoenecian alphabet. You see, up to that time all the letter-based alphabets had were consonants. You just had to know the vowel sounds that went with the consonants to make words. And the only people who could do that were scribes. But when ancient Israel invented vowel letters (not to be confused with those little marks beneath and above the letters that we use today) they instantly democratized language; now anyone could master reading and writing. And those vowel letters were three: the *heh*, *vuv* and *yod*. Hoffman suggests to us that the name of Israel's God – YHVH – which is made up entirely of the vowel letters, is not a coincidence. The soft vowels, unlike the hard consonants, are abstract and formless. In fact, there are some who say that the Name could not even be pronounced. It was simply the sound of breathing.

The truth be told, we have absolutely no idea what it sounded like, because it was forbidden to pronounce it. It was recited but one day a year, on the afternoon of Yom Kippur, in the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary of the Temple, by the High Priest – and he was to be completely alone. (I've often wondered what that conversation between the aging High Priest and his oldest son about how to pronounce the Name must have been like.) The name, it's sound, it's meaning, is shrouded in mystery. This, I believe, is not by accident. All that Torah tells us about God vis a vis God's name is that God exists. "I am". That's all we need to know.

The Nature of God.

It wasn't enough to know God's name. Moses wanted more. Moses wanted to know God. I mean *know* God. Let's just say that being in conversation with God is not enough for Moses. Moses wanted more than just the message. He wanted to be more than just a messenger. Moses wanted intimacy. "Tell me that I've found favor in Your eyes," Moses asks God. God tells Moses he has. "Promise me that you'll never leave me," Moses pleads. God agrees. "Pray, let me behold Your presence." Um . . . No. Sorry Moses. There's a limit. You can know God loves you. You can experience God's presence in the wonders of daily life. But you cannot behold God. "No one may see Me and live," God says. Exodus. Chapter 33.

It is, without question, a remarkable text. I have often likened it to the scene in the Wizard of Oz, when Toto pulls back the curtain. The Holy, the sacred, or as the German philosopher Rudolph Otto calls it (from the Greek) the "noumenous", cannot be empirically known. It must remain mystery. By contrast, as Otto notes, we inhabit the world of the "phenomenous", that which is knowable. Put another way, if we could see it, then it couldn't be sacred. Once the curtain is pulled back, it loses all meaning. This is the essential piece to the Bible's notion of the Holy. By definition, it must remain elusive.

A couple weeks back Bob Mellman shared with me the lyrics of an Iris DeMent song:

*Everybody's wonderin' what and where they all came from.
Everybody's worryin' 'bout where they're gonna go when the whole thing's done.
But no one knows for certain and so it's all the same to me.
I think I'll just let the mystery be.*

It is all mystery. Forget about it. You can't know. And therein lies its beauty. And that's what I believe Torah's trying to say to us about the nature of God.

One of my favorite verses of the Torah comes near the very end. It's a single verse. The very last one of chapter 29 of Deuteronomy. "The mysteries (*ha-nistarot*) belong to God; the revealed things (*ha-niglaot*) belong to us and our children, forever to do the words of this Torah." It doesn't get much clearer. Don't ask too many questions. Stop worrying about whatever it is you don't understand. You can't see Me. Leave the mysteries alone. Just do what I ask of you. That's your job. Just do it. (And you thought *Nike* invented the concept.)

And that brings me to my third and final text.

Our Relationship with God.

This one comes from the Prophets. First Kings. Chapter 19. The prophet Elijah is fleeing for his life from the evil Jezebel and her husband, the king, Ahab. Where else would you run if you were a prophet of God? You'd go to God. And that's just what Elijah does. He goes back to the wilderness, the place where Israel and God first met. Horeb. Sinai. From Beer Sheva, the last outpost on the edge of the desert, it was a journey of forty days and forty nights. He arrives at the mountain, finds a cave, goes in, and goes to sleep. And then "the word of the Lord *came* to him."

And God said, "Why are you here, Elijah?" And Elijah replied, "I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life." So God said, "Step outside the cave." And then according to the text, Elijah witnessed three phenomena (and appreciate that the connection to Rudolph Otto's use of the term of the *phenomenous* should not be lost on us here): he experienced wind, earthquake and fire. And with each one of these phenomena the Bible is clear: God was not in any of them. Until Elijah heard "*kol d'mamah dakah*", a soft murmuring sound, or as many of you will recognize it, a still, small voice. And again came the same exact question: "Why are you here, Elijah?" And again Elijah responds exactly the same way he did the first time God asked him that question: "I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life."

It's a powerful story. A *kol d'mamah daka*. No one really knows what it means. A still, small voice? A soft, murmuring sound? Perhaps it's a sound that only the soul can hear? Perhaps it's the sound of our own life-force, the sound of our breathing? The voice within? What is clear is that it's not in thunder. Or lightning. Not in wind or fire. Not in phenomena but *noumena*. And yet that's not the end of the story. In fact, for me, the whole point of this tale is not about *how* God communicates but rather *what* God then goes on to say to Elijah. After God has twice asked him, "Why are you here, Elijah?" and both times Elijah responds, basically, I'm coming to You for help, God replies (and this is all that God ever really says to Elijah during this momentous visit): "Go back by the way you came, and on to the wilderness of Damascus. When you get there, anoint Hazael as king of Aram and Jehu son of Nimshi as king of Israel. I also want you to anoint Elisha son of Shaphat to succeed you as prophet." In other words, "You're fired."

And this is what I think the story is trying to teach us. Don't go running to God to solve the problems of your life. Your job is to do what God asks of you. Finding God is not the point. All the rock smashing wind, earthquakes and fire are irrelevant. Stop looking for miracles. And for that matter, you don't need to run off to the wilderness, atop some mountain. As we read in

Torah this morning, it's as close to us as the words on our lips. Or the meditations of our hearts. And what that "*kol d'mamah daka*" is saying to us, if we're able to silence ourselves for long enough to hear it, is just do it. That's what God was saying to Elijah. And that's why Elijah lost his job. He was supposed to stand up to evil, not run to God to ask for help. In Judaism, it's not supposed to be us looking for God; rather, it's (to quote Abraham Joshua Heschel) "God in Search of Man."

You want God? You want to find God? I've often taught that that is the whole purpose of religious enterprise. To be at-one with the God-head. Today the code-word is *Spirituality*. It even has it's own section at Barnes and Noble (separate from *Religion*). How often I hear people say, "I'm not religious, I'm spiritual." I get what they're trying to say. "I don't like coming to Temple or going to church. The institutionalization of God just doesn't work for me." But the fact of the matter is, religion is not merely inclusive of the spiritual, it *is* the spiritual. That's the whole point. To help us connect with the *noumenous*.

For Judaism the word for spirituality is *ruchaniyut*. From *ruach*, which means "spirit". But it also means "wind". Genesis. Chapter 1. *Ruach Elohim*. The "Wind" of God hovered over the deep.

One day, while sailing on Buzzard's Bay, it all came clear to me. If you've ever been on a sailboat, then you'll really understand. Because you know that the whole challenge is to get your sail adjusted to the right angle, so that it catches the wind – just right. And when it does, when you get it just right, you sail across the surface of the water at peak speed in virtual silence. *This is ruchaniyut*. By the same token, you also know that when you lose the wind you slow down. You drift. Even worse, your sail claps and bangs. This is, alas, where we live most of our lives. Amidst the clanging. Out of sync with the Holy. But every once in a while we get it back. We catch the Wind. *Ruach Elohim*. All you need to do is adjust your sail. To be in sync with the universe. When you and the wind are one. This is spirituality. *Ruchaniyut*.

Now *how* you do that, well that's another story. Even another sermon. And that's why we have so many different religions. But contrary to what the most fervent will tell you, I don't believe that there's necessarily one right way. We're all just different paths. But I'll say this. And I'd hope by now that it's pretty obvious. For Judaism, the *halakhah*, the road to the Sacred is through a life of Torah. For our people, it's in the *doing*. And even more to the point, it's not about looking for God. In fact, the big hint comes in the very first chapter of Torah. When we are created *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God. We are all reflections of the holy. All of us. Even our enemies. Especially our enemies. And all we need to do is act in accordance, to adjust our personal sails, to be in sync with this truth. *V'ahavta l'rayekha kamokha*. Love your neighbor as yourself.

My brother tells a wonderful story of sitting on the *bimah* with a class of preschoolers. And the topic of discussion was God. Finally the question of "Where does God live?" comes up. So he asks, "Where do you think God lives?" A little hand comes up. Pointing to behind my brother, the child says, "God lives in there. In the ark." "And if we open the ark, what would we find inside? What do you think we would see?" The child pauses for a minute. "A big mirror," the little one said. "A big mirror."

This, I think, is all we need to know about God. It's not rocket science. It's not science. It's having a love for humanity and a reverence for Mystery. Maybe, when all is said and done, we should just "let the mystery be."

"Leave the mysteries to God." Ours is to do.