

What is God?
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I'm going to speak about something tonight that makes a lot of Jews uncomfortable. I want to talk about God. In fact, if I had to say what is one of the major differences between Judaism and Christianity or Islam, it would be how *uncomfortable* many Jews are not only with talking about God, but even about the very idea of God.

Last spring I had two conversations within 24 hours that made me think a lot about God, and what role God plays in Judaism as a religion, and in our community here.

My first conversation was with one of our college students who I happened to run into at the airport last spring. We both had time before our flights so we spent some time catching up. She goes to a small college back east that has just a handful of Jews. She told me she has had many conversations with friends of different faiths about religion. She said that most of them talk about how the religions they were raised in taught them to be motivated to do what is right because of the promise of heaven or the threat of hell, Divine Judgement was a major component in their faiths. Our congregant said her friends were amazed and confused that heaven and hell don't factor in at all as reasons for her to behave in a moral way. But rather that she was taught that you do what is right, because it is right, not because there's going to be a glorious afterlife or eternal damnation. Rather she had learned that the focus in Judaism is taking responsibility for the here and now, and being accountable to each other.

The very next day, I was at a Board Meeting for the Central Conf. Of American Rabbis. We had been having an intense discussion about current events, and different problems that are facing the Jewish community and ourselves as individuals, and what we should do about them, and then suddenly one of people said "how is it that we're in a room full of rabbis and we're not talking about God at all? "Where," he asked, "is God in how we make our ethical decisions?"

These two questions made me wonder, where *is* God in Jewish life and in particular in the Reform Movement? Have we become so hung up and turned off by religious language as it is used in the dominant culture, that we have lost our own connection to what is considered religious? Or at least lost the ability to articulate or describe what *we* mean when we talk about what is Holy and Sacred?

There was a Pew study done in 2013 on American Jewish life. One of the questions had to do with belief in God. Of the Reform Jews surveyed, 29%, less than a third, said that they absolutely believed in God or some sort of universal spirit. 47% kinda-believed, but weren't totally sure, and 20% said nope, nothing, nada, and the remaining 4% basically said "I don't know."¹

From my experience, this sounds about right. After all, we are a religion that is uncomfortable with dogma and takes pride in the idea that we wrestle with our faith. It shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone, because it's right there in our name – Yisrael, one who wrestles with God and with people. Inherent in our religion is a desire or a need to wrestle with the very idea of who or what God is.

For me, God is not a Who, God is a "what," or to be more precise, God is a verb. God is to be found in what we *do*, not just in what we believe.

I think that for most Jews, God, or holiness, or a sense of the sacred, can be found not only in the act of wrestling with our beliefs, but in a daily pursuit of living a good and ethical life.

In the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 6, Moses is very clear to us about what it means to be in relationship with God. The Rabbis took these words and placed them in the daily liturgy in the form of the Vehavta to remind us, morning and night, *how* to be in a relationship with God:

"You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.

¹ <https://www.pewforum.org/2013/10/01/chapter-4-religious-beliefs-and-practices/>

Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:5-9)”

In other words, to be in a relationship with God means that we have a responsibility in how we behave. It is in our actions that we find God’s presence. God is to be found in how we teach our children. God is to be found at our kitchen tables. God is to be found in how we treat each other. We put up *mezuzot* on our doorposts to remind us how to behave when we enter and when we leave our homes because God is to be found in the way we live our lives, each and every day, at home and on our way.

In the Talmud we are taught that the great rabbi, Abaye said: “Spread the love of God through your actions. If you yourself study and help others to do so, if your business activities are decent and trustworthy, what will people say? [They will say] “Have you seen the behavior of one who studies Torah? How beautiful! What a fine person!” Thus Isaiah (49:3) taught, “You are My servant Israel. I will be glorified *through* you.”²

In other words God can be found in *what we do*. God is revealed and made manifest in the world through *our* actions, not through our words or our prayers.

I don’t assume that most people who come to services come to talk with God, because you can find God anywhere. I assume that people come to be part of a community, and when they find that sense of belonging, of connection with others, they also find a sense of holiness. It is as the great 20th century theologian, Martin Buber said: “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.” In other words, some people experience God in the Sanctuary and others experience God when they’re connecting with someone at the *oneg*.

So why is our religion, and our synagogues filled with so many Jews who are uncomfortable with the idea of God? I believe that *part* of our problem is that the

² Based on Yoma 86a

images that are conjured up by the very word “God” does not necessarily reflect a *Jewish* understanding of God. Because if we take the time to delve into our sacred teachings, we would soon discover that the Jewish notion of God is somewhat different than what the dominant Western Culture often depicts.

Four times in the Torah we are given a glimpse of how God conceives of God’s own self. And spoiler alert...none of those images of are of an old white guy with a beard sitting on a throne in the clouds. In fact three of the descriptions don’t involve physicality at all, three of the descriptions use verbs rather than nouns or adjectives to describe God. And in none of the four descriptions is God a static being. The descriptions reflect both an evolving nature as well as ways of behaving in the world.

The first glimpse we’re given of God’s understanding of self is in Genesis 1:27:

ויברא אלהים | את-האדם בצלמו בצלם אלהים ברא אתו זכר ונקבה ברא אתם:

“So God created humanity in [God’s] own image, *b’tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God, God created [the human]; male and female [God] created them.

This is where we derive the belief that humanity is created in the *t’zelem* – in the image of God. This doesn’t mean God *looks* like a human being, but it means that we are all a *reflection* of holiness. In order to begin to understand God’s nature we would have to understand all of humanity throughout time. To see a spark of the Divine in another is to see but one spark of God, not the whole fire, but a single spark. When we see the Divine in humanity, we see both good and bad, frightening and inspiring, we see all of the complexity in which we exist.

The second time that God articulates who or what God is, is in Exodus, chapter 3, when Moses encounters God at the Burning Bush. God is not the burning bush, it’s simply God’s voice coming through the bush, like it’s a Bluetooth speaker. When Moses asks God who shall he tell the children of Israel has sent him to them, God responds by giving this name:

אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר אֱלֹהִים³

³ Exodus 3:14

It is difficult to translate this name, but the most common Jewish translation is: “I will be what I will be.”

From this name we understand that God is not static, God is always changing and evolving over time. And if *we* are created in the image of God, then we too should be ever changing and evolving, always in a constant state of becoming that which we can be, not just what we are now.

The third story is also in the Book of Exodus. After the Golden Calf incident, Moses is crushed, he is having a crises of faith and he’s ready to quit. He goes back up the mountain, and in the midst of his crises, Moses begs God to please be revealed to him.

And as God passes before Moses, offering him a small glimpse of the Divine presence, what matters is not what Moses sees, but what he hears.

יהוה | יהוה אל רחום וחנון ארך אפים ורב-חסד ואמת:
נצר חסד לאלפים נשא עון ופשע וחטאה ונקה לא ינקה
פקד עון אבות על-בנים ועל-בני בנים על-שלשים ועל-רבעים:

It’s a long name, which is why it probably why it never caught on as something we name our kids. But this is what it means:

“Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and gracious, long suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children, and upon the children’s children, to the third and to the fourth generation.”⁴

If this sounds familiar it is because a slightly abbreviated version of this name is chanted at the beginning of the Rosh Hashanah Torah service, and several times during Yom Kippur as we stand before the open ark, calling out to God to hear our

⁴ Exodus 34:6-7

words of atonement. It's understandable why we conveniently cut out the part about visiting the sins of the parents on the children.

However this “name” that God gives Moses is less a name and more of a complex network of emotions and actions that are sometimes in conflict with each other, imperfect, and passionate, in other words, God is just like us, or more correctly, we are just like God. Complex and an ever changing paradox.

The fourth, and perhaps most important, description of God can be found in Leviticus, chapter 19, in what is often referred to as the Holiness Code. God says to Moses:

דבר אל-כל-עדת בני-ישראל ואמרת אליהם קדשים תהיו כי קדוש אני יהוה אלהיכם:
Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel, and say to them,
You shall be holy; for I the Eternal your God am holy.⁵

That's a beautiful mandate, but what does it mean to be “holy”? Luckily for us, the rest of Leviticus, chapter 19 goes on to tell us.

We discover in this passage that “holiness” is found not in what we believe, but in how we behave, in how we treat each other, our neighbor, and the stranger. Holiness can be found in what type of society we create, and even how we treat time itself. Holiness is made manifest in our world by how *we behave* in this world. We find holiness when we perform the *mitzvot*, when we repair the world, when we honor time by celebrating Shabbat and the holidays, when we protect the most vulnerable, and when we acknowledge that every human being we encounter is a reflection of the Holy One.

Through these four Biblical examples we are given glimpses of what is meant in Judaism when we talk about “God.”

God is to be found in each other and in how we respond to each other, as well as within ourselves. It is as Martin Buber said “When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them.”

⁵ Lev. 19:2

So in my many decades of trying to understand God, what is it then when I pray, when I seek God, when I talk about God, is it that *I* believe? What place does God play in my life?

I believe that God is to be found in the limitless potential that rests within each of us, and in society as a whole.

I believe that God is that which pushes us individually and collectively to evolve towards something better tomorrow than we were yesterday or today.

God is complex, God is the beginning and the end, the before and the after, and all that exists in between. God is to be found both in the good and the bad, the darkness and the light. Within that which we call God is the fury of the storm and the gentleness of the morning dew.

God is present both in the pain of losing someone we love and in the joy of welcoming a new life. God is the *meaning* we find in the contradictions of life.

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice. I believe that God is the arc of the moral universe, which operates in a dimension that is far beyond any *one* of us, but an arc that includes *all* of us.

God is what we do, every day, when we try to be better, and to do better than we did the day before. God is how we behave towards others and towards ourselves, how we treat our brothers and our sisters, our neighbors and the stranger in our midst.

God is a reflection of all of humanity coming together as one. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai echad* – it's not just that there is one God, but God is One-ness. God is what happens when humanity comes together united for the common good, rather than a splintered humanity that is at war with itself.

My childhood rabbi taught me that it doesn't matter if we *say* we believe in God, what matters is that we are *doing* what God wants us *to do*.

So I am going to set out a challenge to each of you this year, whether you say you believe in God or not. I'm going to invite you each and every day, before you go to sleep at night, to reflect on the day and ask yourself was there a moment or a place where God was present that day? Did you make space for the possibility of holiness in your interactions with people at work and at home? Did you see it in nature or someplace along the way? Did you stop to recognize that *you* are part of what is holy in the world?

Again, I'm not asking you to look for the old white guy with the beard. But to look for God as the spark of holiness that inspires us to be better, to be engaged in acts of compassion, justice, and forgiveness. Look for the electricity that passes between two people when they are acting as their authentic selves. And don't be afraid to ask yourself, "What did I *do* today to be a reflection of God in our world? What did I do today to be part of, or to honor, the oneness of God in our world?"

I hope that when we gather again as a community for the High Holidays next year, you will have discovered that God is everywhere, if only we pay better attention to the world around us and are more mindful in our everyday deeds.

And then and only then can we really praise the Holy One, not only with our words, but with the very essence of who we are.