



## I Believe

*A Sermon by  
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Of all of Woody Allen's comedic one-liners, the one that resonates the most for me is his wish that God would prove His existence by some kind of direct, personal revelation – such as making a large deposit in a Swiss bank account in his name.

I suspect that deep down many of us harbor similar feelings. We wish that we could be more certain of God's existence, and that obvious signs that God is real were more apparent. If only God were less subtle and more blatant. We would willingly shed the uncertainty and ambiguity for more obvious and less opaque manifestations of God's presence. Comedian David Steinberg used to muse that after Moses asked God to explain with whom was he speaking at the Burning Bush, and God responded, "*Eheyeh asher eheyeh*, I am that I am," Moses, sarcastically remarked, "Thanks for clearing that up for me."

But alas, faith is not so easy, and God is not so evident. Believing in God requires effort. And sometimes, we are too busy, preoccupied or lazy to put forth the effort. Or we may be apathetic and wonder why bother to even try. Couple this with earthquakes and other natural disasters and personal tragedies, along with a healthy dose of fanatics murdering those who do not conform to their beliefs and it is easy to see why religion can be a tough sell.

In truth, it is rare that I see, feel or hear God. But this does not mean that I do not sense or experience God. While God's presence may not be evident by use of our sensory perceptions this does not mean that we cannot sense God. When you use one of your five senses, you perceive something directly. But then to truly appreciate and comprehend whatever is beheld, further processing, beyond the initial intake is necessary. I would like to suggest that this is the case with how we come to perceive God. One of the unique attributes of God is that we cannot on a primary level use our senses to experience God. It takes a little work, and this is why some give up. The Psalmists and our sages teach that although God is not visible, we can see evidence of His handiwork. This is what is sometimes referred to as "predicate theology." This means that God's presence can be witnessed when we reflect upon and appreciate the ways in which God is revealed in the world, through His acts. It is a two-step process, requiring a little work. This also explains why we Jews are usually uncomfortable with tales of people saying that they have seen or heard God. Even as it proclaims that God acts in history, is the Creator of the Universe and affirms that God is a personal God, our tradition teaches that God is discerned in the abstract and indirectly.

This week's Torah portion about the plagues brought upon Egypt is the first example of true Jewish chutzpah. A measly, lowly disparate group of slaves challenges the most powerful nation on earth. Despite centuries of servitude, they maintain that, as Rabbi Shlomo Riskin has written, "they were chosen by God Himself to be placed at the center of history and become the living expression of a way of life which stands in direct opposition to that of the pharaohs." The seminal story of the Exodus is a powerful demonstration that God cares about justice and the oppressed, that the fate of His people and how individuals act is of primary concern to this God. After all, the slaves did not actually see God. They saw what happened to the Egyptians and accepted the interpretation of their leader Moses that it was the result of a merciful act of Divine intervention.

I reject those who see in contemporary acts of nature or disasters the hand of God, in part because the interpretations do not emanate from individuals who have the stature of a Moses and because more often than not their explanations are justifications of their own personal beliefs.

We have a Torah and we have the interpretations of our sages and philosophers to help us understand what God expects of us. Our sacred writings are the filter we use to understand life's events. And that Torah as interpreted by the rabbis demands that I take responsibility for my actions. It tells me that I have an obligation to make the world a better place by living a life of mitzvot. In so doing it helps me live in relationship to God, to my people and the community I am part of.

I believe that God has made it amply clear what we should strive to do. As the prophet Micah proclaimed, "I have told you what the Lord requires of you: Only to do justice, to act with mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord, thy God." How remarkable that he makes it seem so simple and so attainable. Even more remarkable is that almost 3,000 years after making this comment his words are remembered and serve as inspiration to many.

Look at the message of the prophet Isaiah, whose vision of the future continues to inspire us. "In the end of days, the mountain of the Lord shall be exalted, and many nations shall come unto it... And they shall beat their spears into pruning hooks, and their swords into ploughshares, and nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore."

For every terrorist who blows himself up and commits murder in the name of God, there are thousands who have been inspired to work for justice, to act with compassion and mercy by a God who asks His followers to strive to be like Him. As stated in the book of Leviticus, "You shall be holy, because I the Lord your God am holy." The Biblical imagery inspired Martin Luther King, who aroused and motivated his followers the night before he died, when he said, "I may not get to the Promised Land with you, but I have been to the mountaintop. I have seen the Promised Land."

Rather than worry about why we don't see God directly, I prefer to focus on how to try to follow what our sages teach is God's message in my daily life, to work on trying to be a better, kinder person.

It is a challenge to believe in something emanating from an infinite unique being unlike anything else we know, especially when this Divine Being is not visible or easily discernible. Our tradition teaches that the focus should be on understanding the message. That is how we come to know God, and why Judaism places such an emphasis on study of Torah.

I believe that God is the inspiration behind the creative spark implanted within the human spirit. God is the source which drives humans to do good and to reach new heights, to surpass our previous achievements. To be even more specific, there are times when I hear a beautiful piece of music, or hear or see a performer achieve something truly noteworthy or magnificent, and I feel touched. There are times when I see beauty in nature, and I feel moved, and I sense that God is present in this place or moment. Many years ago, on my very first visit to Israel I went snorkeling in the Red Sea, by Eilat. I saw colors and fish that were so magnificent. At the time I wrote, "Nature is the beauty that God put in the world for us to enjoy, creations from God's palette of life."

At times of loneliness, doubt and vulnerability I turn to God in the hope that I will find the strength, wisdom and guidance to endure and persevere through trying times. I feel connected and that I am not alone.

And finally, I feel most connected to God when I realize that I am part of an ancient, yet contemporary people who have an eternal covenant with God, who have sought and fought with God, who understand that we must both love and fear God, and who have not been afraid to challenge, question, argue with and even be angry at this God. There are times when I doubt God's existence. There are times when I am disappointed in God or by the sight of injustice, and question my own faith. At times such as these, I think of the sages of our tradition, and feel comforted to know that I am in good company. The very name of our people, "Israel" means to struggle with God, and so I am happy to be a part of that ongoing wrestling match.

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