
WHEN IS GOD?

A story is told about Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a Hasidic master who lived in the 19th century. A young man comes to the Kotzker Rebbe, as he was also known, and said, “Rebbe, I can no longer believe in God.”

“Why is that?” the Rebbe inquired.

“I cannot believe in God because the world is so filled with pain, with suffering, with ugliness, with evil. How could there be a God in such a world?” the young man answered.

“Why do you care?” asked the Rebbe.

“What do you mean, ‘why do I care?’” the young man asked, growing frustrated. “How can a person not care? Innocent people suffer, the world is ruled by the cruel and the heartless, its beauty is drowning in ugliness. I care because it hurts me so and I can’t understand why God would let it be this way!”

Again, the Rebbe inquired, “But why do you care?”

The young man grew more exasperated. “Someone has to care! Someone has to witness the pain of the world and cry. If not, then all the suffering is meaningless. If no one cries, then the universe is a dark, lifeless place. I care because I want with all my heart to see a better world for my children and for theirs. I owe it to them to care!”

And again, the Rebbe asked, “But why do you care?”

And now the young man lost his composure altogether and he wept. “I care. I have to care. I must. It’s what and who I am.”

“Well then,” the Rebbe responded, “if you care so much, then God exists.” (Rabbi Edward Feinstein, *Tough Questions Jews Ask Teacher’s Guide*, p. 12)

By prompting the young man to discover the reasons behind his righteous anger, the Kotzker Rebbe is teaching us that God is not some concept to be believed, but a presence that we encounter and an experience that lives through us. On the High Holy Days, we encounter God through the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy.

Let’s back up for a moment. Does any know what Triskaidekaphobia is? It is the fear of the number 13.

Although the term itself was not coined until the late 19th or early 20th century, it has been a common superstition for the last 2,000 years. All of us in some way have encountered evidence of Western society's phobia of 13. Hotels have no 13th floor. Airplanes have no 13th row. Airports have no "Gate 13."

The exact beginnings of Triskaidekaphobia are unclear. One origin comes from the Last Supper, where there were thirteen men at the table, one of whom, Judas, betrayed Jesus. Another possible origin for this irrational fear is the discontinuity of the solar and lunar cycles. Western society follows a solar year instead of the lunar year, but the lunar cycle stands out because there are thirteen moon cycles in one solar year. Twelve was seen as a perfect number, being the product of three and four. Thirteen, however, is a prime number, and does not fit any mathematical pattern.

In September, we experienced Friday the 13th with a full moon. Many people were talking about how ominous this was. Jews weren't so worried. Friday is the day that Shabbat comes back to us. A full moon represents God's feminine presence that loves and cares for Israel. And

for Jews, thirteen is neither bad nor neutral. It is celebrated and holy. Thirteen is the age at which a boy becomes Bar Mitzvah. According the Rabbis, there are thirteen hermeneutical principles by which the Torah is interpreted. Maimonides articulated thirteen principles of Jewish faith, which became the basis for Yigdal, a well-known Shabbat song.

On Passover, we sing “Who knows one?” where we count up to thirteen. In that last verse, we recite **שְׁלֹשָׁה עָשָׂר מִדִּינָא** Aramaic for the more familiar Hebrew phrase, **שלש עשרה מידות הרחמים**, The Thirteen Attributes of God’s mercy. Western society might view the number 13 as unlucky and ominous. For Jews, 13 is the number of forgiveness, and we recite these attributes frequently throughout our High Holy Day Season.

The Rabbinic enumeration of God’s thirteen attributes comes from the Torah, in the aftermath of Israel’s building of the Golden Calf, which Jewish tradition views as the greatest sin of Israel. Since you’ve all seen the movie, I don’t have to retell the story of what happened. After the dust settles, Moses, God, and Israel reconcile, recommit to each other, and build a stronger relationship. In this moment of favor and grace, Moses

says to God, “By the way, since we’re getting all chummy, can you show me what you look like?” God replies, “Well, no one can see me and live.” Which is not a “no.” God wants to show Moses. And so, Moses descends the mountain and hides in a cleft of rock, after which God descends, passes by Moses, and declares,

יִי אֱלֹהֵי רַחֲמוֹת וְחַנּוּן אֶרְדָּא אִפְּיָם וְרַב־חֶסֶד וְאֱמֶת : נִצְרָר

חֶסֶד לְאֵלֵינוּ נִשְׂאָר עֵינֵינוּ וְפָשַׁע וְחַטָּאת וְנִקְהָה לְאֵל וְנִקְהָה פְּקֻדָּה |

עֵינֵינוּ אֲבוֹת עַל־בָּנֵינוּ וְעַל־בְּנֵי בָנֵינוּ עַל־שְׂלֵשִׁים וְעַל־רִבְעִים

Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth, keeping kindness unto thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, but not fully cleansing, visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children’s children to the third and fourth generation. (Exodus 34:6-7)

The full verse from the Book of Exodus is actually different from what we just recited in our Torah service. When the rabbis were editing our prayers, they, in their great chutzpah, truncated the end of the verse so as to change God’s message to us. When we recite the 13 attributes in

our prayers, we say, “Adonai, Adonai, God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, abundant in kindness and truth, keeping kindness unto thousands, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and cleansing.” The rabbis, as it were, force God’s hand, and all Jews who recite the 13 attributes of mercy do the same. We recite the attributes as we do, not only because God said them and forgave long ago, but also because we tell God that this is how we hope God will act on these days of judgment.

An extended analysis of these verses in the Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17a-b) shows how these attributes are demonstrations of God’s true desire to be merciful. It concludes with the anthropomorphic image of God wrapping Himself in a tallit like the leader of a Jewish prayer service. God recites the attributes of mercy, teaching them to Moses and instructing him, “Whenever the Jewish people sin, let them act before Me in accordance with this order. Let the prayer leader wrap himself in a tallit and publicly recite the thirteen attributes of mercy, and I will forgive them.” In another midrash (Brakhot 7a), the Rabbis tell us that God invents God’s own prayer, “Make it be my will, that my compassion may overcome my anger

and that it may prevail over my attribute of justice and judgment, and that I deal with my children according to the attribute of compassion, and that I may not act towards them according to the strict line of justice.” God is supposed to recite this prayer especially in moments when God’s anger might be aroused by humanity’s failings.

According to the Rabbis, these attributes are a formula for forgiveness, to be recited whenever forgiveness is needed, and they ground the ritual in another event in the Torah. In the Book of Numbers, the people of Israel sin again as they were whipped up into a frenzy by the scouts who explored the land of Canaan, and reported back that it would be too difficult for them. In their hysteria, the Israelites demanded to go back to the good old days in Egypt, where at least they had food to eat. God was not happy about the spies’ report or Israel’s reaction, but Moses recited the attributes as a liturgical formula, and God forgave them. (Numbers 14:11-20) The rabbinic promise of perpetual pardon is based in this biblical precedent.

The 13 Attributes of God are not just the reminder to God about forgiveness. At their essence, they are key to understanding how we encounter God. When Moses first met God at the Burning Bush, God revealed the divine essence to be *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, “I am that I am” or “I will be what I will be.” Later, God made Himself known to Israel through the promises to free Israel from Egypt, deliver them from slavery, redeem them from Pharaoh’s captivity, take them as God’s own people, and bring them to the land promised of their ancestors (Exodus 6:6-7), five guarantees that inspire the four cups of wine plus the cup of Elijah at the Passover Seder. In the opening line of the Ten Commandments of Exodus 20, God says, “I am Adonai your God who led you out of the land of Egypt.” In each of these revelatory moments, knowledge of God is communicated experientially, not existentially.

A few weeks ago, in class with my post-B’nai Mitzvah 8th graders, as I had my water bottle sitting on the table next to me, I asked them, “What is a cup?” They all came up with definitions about its shape, describing that it is an object that holds liquids because it is a cylinder with one side

left open. My water bottle has a top with a straw, so they described that too. I asked them to describe some other objects in the same manner. Then I asked them, “What is God?” They were at a loss for words, struggled for a while, and then began to describe things God does or has done.

As their Rabbi, I was very pleased. Our tradition does not have systematic theology. Neither the Bible nor Rabbinic Literature describes what God is. To know God is to see what God has done. God is not found through specific definitions, but rather encountered through experiences. When I asked the students, “When did you feel that God was close to you?” they all had something meaningful and powerful to share. As Rabbi Edward Feinstein has written, “Believing in God is not a matter of accepting an abstract idea. Believing in God means gathering in the moments when God feels close by and taking these moments seriously. It means remembering these moments, cherishing them, and saving them. It means pursuing them. And it means learning from them.” (*Tough Questions*

Jews Ask, p. 9-10)

Human Beings have the desire to anthropomorphize God because we want to have familiarity with God. This line of thinking goes, “If we are created in the image of God, then God must be created in the image of humanity.” This is why the Bible and Rabbinic literature speak of God in human terms, only much greater. Jewish tradition offers us a corrective to this by saying that the Bible was written in the language of humanity so that we can understand such concepts, and every noun that we use for God is merely a metaphor.

The inherent flaw in thinking that God is just some super-human being actually separates God from humanity. By elevating God, we become increasingly subordinate to the will and acts of God, where God is way up there, and we are way down here. It also implies that God’s characteristics are beyond anything that we can comprehend. However, the 13 Attributes teach us to understand God in a different way. These terms are not actually attributes. Rather, they are moments when we experience relationship in process, where God is a presence, not an essence.

We have been taught to think of God as a noun. As we know, nouns name something. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that we have no nouns by which to express God's essence; we have only adverbs to indicate the ways in which God acts. A noun presupposes comprehension. Calling God by a specific name means that we know God in a manner that we can talk about other nouns. However, God's name, spelled Y-H-W-H, appears in a verbal form, meaning something like, "causing to come into being." God's name, then, is not a static noun, but a dynamic verb, encompassing past, present, and future states of being. God is not a subject or an object, and is only known in a constantly evolving relationship with human beings. The Zohar (II. 42) warns, "woe to the person who compares God with any single attribute of God."

Rabbi Harold Schulweis has suggested that we shift our focus from God-as-noun to God-as-verb, from subject to predicate, from God as person to Godliness in action. Jews have blessings for everything, from eating various kinds of foods, to experiencing things for the first time, to meeting certain kinds of people, to performing ritual mitzvot. There is

even a blessing that one recites after relieving one's self. We have blessings for everything because every moment in life is an opportunity to experience God. When we recite blessings, we describe God in a way that might sound like a noun, but is really a present tense verb, or a gerund, for you grammarians out there. Before we eat bread, we say that God is "bringing forth bread from the earth." In our litany of morning blessings, we say that God is "healing the sick," "raising the fallen," "releasing the bound." Schulweis says that, when we praise God in human terms in the blessing, we also recognize the Godliness in the action that has brought that thing to be.

God's essence is ultimately unknowable. The only thing that we can know about divinity are the qualities or attributes of God which we experience, and which we must emulate to lead Godly lives. A midrash (Sifrei Deuteronomy, Eikev) tells us that to walk in God's ways means to live our lives by God's 13 Attributes. Just as God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abundant in kindness and faithfulness, we should be so as well. Another midrash (Sotah 14a), teaches: just as God clothed the naked,

visited the sick, and comforted mourners in the Torah, so should we, if we are to walk in God's ways.

To know God is to see what God has done, and to encounter God is to be attuned to the moments when God is acting in the world. To be godly is to imitate the imperatives of godliness by acting through justice, mercy, compassion, and righteousness. In the traditional Jewish understanding, God is not a perfect, static being. The God of the Bible and the Rabbis is not the Unmoved Mover or the Perfection of Being from Aristotelian philosophy. God is relational. So too, Godliness is not a fixed and perfect state, but a life-giving process of possibility as we work to create a Godlier world.

Our recitation of the 13 attributes is not just for God. It is also to remind ourselves the ways in which God cares for us. Even more so, it is to motivate us to our own highest aspirations. God is kind, merciful, gracious, and forgiving, and so are we when we are at our best. On the High Holy Days, these are the qualities that we need to hear so that we can become our best selves. We are created in the image of God, and so,

these are the attributes that we should adopt and emulate in order to lead Godly lives. Schulweis prefers to speak of God, not in locational or existential terms, but in experiential terms. He emphasizes that the question we should be asking is not “Where is God?” or “What is God?” but rather, “When is God?”

A little over 3 years ago, the first Shabbat that I served as rabbi of Congregation Or Atid, I spoke about my move here, which was unpleasant to say the least. It consisted of a slightly annoying delayed departure from Indianapolis, as well as a major setback in Jena’s car needing a new muffler system just a few hours into our drive. We were stranded in Chillicothe, Ohio, while parts were shipped in overnight to a car dealership, where they worked all day to get us back on the road that evening.

On that first Shabbat, I talked about how God was present through that trying time: God was in the compassion and care that Anthony, the car dealership representative, showed us by booking us a hotel and rental car, and making sure that Jena’s car was well-taken care of. God was in

Naomi's demeanor, as our little 5-month-old could have been screaming because her routines were disturbed, but stayed calm and playful as we waited at the car dealership. God was in the support that the Or Atid community showed us when so many came to our house on Sunday to assist with the unpacking. Although I could have understood my move only in terms of the frustrations it caused, I chose to see it as a series of moments when God was acting through people to alleviate these annoyances, witnessing the divine in the most unlikely of places.

If we make the effort to become aware of these moments, each of us can recall feeling the presence of God in our lives. The kindnesses we show to each other on a personal level, those moments when we create meaningful relationships out of our everyday interactions, are the ways we emulate God and bring Godliness into the world. In fact, doing interpersonal mitzvot, performing Jewish rituals, and reciting blessings as we perform everyday activities are the multiplicity of ways that the entire Jewish enterprise answers the question "When is God?"

On Rosh Hashanah and the Festivals, we chant these attributes during the Torah service. On Yom Kippur, we recite them many times over the course of our day of introspection. In fact, we have been chanting them since Selihot, a week and a half before Rosh Hashanah. We sing them in a haunting, serious, somber, ominous melody. The tune transports us back to that great moment of power and awe, as if we were standing in that cleft of rock with Moses, as God revealed God's true presence. As the whole congregation sings together, we turn to God in both humility and chutzpah, confessing our sins and pleading that God be the forgiving God we need in that moment. We seek repentance for ourselves and mercy from God.

The recitation and repetition of the 13 attributes is not an intellectual exercise or a statement of philosophy, but rather an outpouring of feelings and a yearning for relationship. The ritual invites us to become partners with God in transforming ourselves as we are, into the people that we wish to be. Like all of the Jewish blessings available to us, reciting the 13 attributes allows us to recognize when God is present

in our lives through our own actions and the actions of others. They are a prompt to act Godly.

Another famous story about the Kotkzer Rebbe relates that someone once asked him, “Rebbe, where is God?” He responded, “Wherever we let Him in.” If I may be so bold as to put words into the mouth of a great sage, the Kotkzer Rebbe was not talking about location. Instead, he was talking about constantly being open to any and every moment when we might experience an encounter with God.

As we transition from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur and begin the year anew, may we fill our lives with the wealth of experiences, whether blessing, ritual, or acts of kindness that are the answer to the quintessential Jewish question, “When is God?”