

Thirty-One Flavors

There are moments, bits of conversation, that can stay with us for a long time, interactions that still echo years later. A few sentences that a friend and I said to each other nearly 20 years ago has remained with me ever since. As I prepared this talk I realized that in some ways my life of the past 10 years has been a partial answer to a conversation that was never finished.

I was 18 or 19 years old, visiting my friend Adam in New York. I knew Adam through Habonim, a socialist Zionist youth movement connected to the kibbutz movement in Israel. Habonim had been a huge part of my life from the time I was 12 years old; I loved its ideology and practice of cooperative community. It was an avowedly secular movement, but as I hit my teen years I was comfortable thinking and talking about God and big spiritual questions, and I didn't experience this as a contradiction with my socialist leanings. A picket line was sacred, and so were other things in the universe.

But what didn't feel like a contradiction to me was puzzling to some of my Habonim friends. That day in New York, Adam asked me, "Toba, I don't understand why you talk about God—what do you mean by it?" So I told him about having a sense of being part of something larger than myself, my conviction that there was something out there, and in us, that connected me to other people and to the world. And Adam replied, "But Toba, everybody feels that. Why do you have to call it God?"

Good question. Much later I realized I had wanted to ask him, "Why is it so hard for you to call it God?"

So these two questions are what I want to think about with you today—why do we have to call it God, or do we? And why is it so hard to call it God?

Now that I'm a rabbi, I realize there is a real "God problem" in the Jewish community. There's a difficulty with this word, with what it represents. I know that this God problem keeps a lot of Jews away from organized Jewish community. I know there are many folks who feel badly about what they think they ought to believe but can't. And I know there are many people who feel that the labels "spiritual" or "religious" must refer to somebody else. There's a profound discomfort about this "God" word for so many people, and it makes me sad, because I see the distance it puts between Jews and their Judaism, between Jews and Jewish community. And at the same time I know this distance and discomfort from the inside, because it's a fairly new thing for me to be comfortable with this word "spiritual," and I'm still defining for myself how the label "religious" fits me or doesn't.

I want to look a little more deeply at this God problem, to try to understand what that word is supposed to mean, as opposed to what so many people assume it means. And I want to challenge this notion that there are two categories of people in this world: those who are "spiritual" or "religious," and those who are not. The fact is, we all have a spirit. Each of us has had moments that are profound or mysterious, deeply moving or wonderfully joyous—that is, moments when our spirits are alive and connected to something beyond the limits of our own ego, whatever that "something" might be.

But then we bump up against that "God" word, and things get more difficult. For some of us that word works fine, but for others—it's annoying, or embarrassing, or alien, or just wrong.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, had a great insight about this disconnect that

my friend Adam pointed out—the disjunction between a feeling that many, perhaps all, people share, and, on the other hand, the language of religion. Kaplan wrote that there are really two separate things—the first he called *belief* in God, and the second, a *conception* of God. What Kaplan called “belief” is actually an intuitive experience of some kind of Power within and beyond ourselves, and he understood this experience to be universal, a basic aspect of being human. But our *conception* of God—that is, the ways we talk about God, our understandings of what God is—is anything but universal. It is time-bound and culture-bound; it depends on who we are, what community we are a part of, and what time we live in.

Kaplan’s suggestion was that our problem is not so much with our experience of what we have come to call “God,” but with the words and concepts that we use to articulate that experience. When a conception of God is no longer convincing or evocative, he argued, we need to change it. We are not changing God in this process; we are changing how we talk about an experience that is fundamental to who we are as human beings.

Kaplan claimed that how we talk about things matters; we need language that matches our experience. People who have studied religion in more recent years have realized that our language both reflects and shapes our experience. It’s not just that we attach words to things, but that our actual perception of reality is shaped by the language we use to describe it.

Understood in this way, religious words and concepts are a particular kind of language that helps us articulate experiences that are hard to put into words. And even more, religious language helps us cultivate ways of perceiving and acting. When you read a book looking for spelling mistakes, it’s a different experience than reading a book looking for enjoyment, or an intellectual challenge. When God concepts shape how we think and act, we are “reading” the world in a way that—if it’s working properly—opens up experiences to us that we might not otherwise have access to.

But religious language does more than help us read the book; in a way it defines the book that we find ourselves in. People who write about religion these days talk about the role of “myth” in shaping our experience of the world. Not “myth” in the sense of a big story that’s not true, but “myth” as a grand narrative and a set of symbols that help us give meaning to our lives. These “myths” give us some sense of where we come from, why we’re here, and where we’re going. They give us context and a sense of purpose. Human beings have difficulty living outside of a story, without any symbols. As soon as one myth breaks down, we’re off inventing new ones. Good examples of that are Marx and Freud, who both wrote new myths for the modern world, grand stories that help us explain ourselves and the world around us.

If we look around us in 21st century America, we can see lots of different attempts to create new myths that will give meaning to our lives, sometimes in very unlikely places.

I noticed this the other day as I was sitting in a Starbucks. What is it about Starbucks, I was wondering...and then I realized: when you go into a Starbucks, you’re not just walking into a coffeeshop; you’re entering an entire world! Starbucks actually has a mission statement; did you know this? They call it “commitment to origins” (sounds pretty religious to me!). The world of Starbucks comes with its own language—grande, venti, “tall” means small...with its own music, with social action projects, and with products that make you feel that by consuming them, you are actually helping to repair the world. At Starbucks, the simple coffee bean has been transformed into a sacred object. In their display of the journey of a coffee bean, from raw to roasted, we are told, in the final step: “These are now

Starbuck Beans. Ground to release flavor and fulfill promises.” Fulfill promises! These are angelic beans indeed.

So whether it’s at Starbucks or somewhere else, we human beings seem to like to feel that we are part of something larger. I would argue that this is because we are part of something larger. We start with this intuitive knowing, and then we search for language to describe what that “something larger” is. What scholars of religion call “myth-making” is really just the honest attempt, by every community in every era in all parts of the world, to give words and form to our sense of our own place in the universe, to the insights of our minds and hearts.

So we start with our experience, but then we move to the realm of language, to the struggle to articulate something that is so hard to put into words. We wrestle with words and images to describe our connection to something that seems at once to be beyond us and to live within us. We try to make comprehensible what it is that has ultimate value in our lives, and then we make commitments to act according to those ultimate values. For Reconstructionist Jews, that is the definition of Judaism. Judaism is not a given set of beliefs that exists somewhere “out there.” Judaism is an ongoing, evolving attempt to understand our place in the world and our encounter with a Power that animates the universe and that motivates us to fulfill our human potential.

It’s an evolving process because there is constant movement from experience to language and back to experience again; how we know and how we speak affects how we act. Our symbols and stories deepen and transform our experience, and then we search for new language, and the cycle continues.

So it matters how we talk about these things, because there is a difference between being part of a meaningful spiritual and cultural tradition, and being in a coffee shop. And it matters what we describe as having ultimate value—because our understanding of what is ultimate has a big effect on how we live our lives. If we believe that having \$1 million dollars and winning is of ultimate value, then we will sit on an island and eat bugs on national television.

Which brings me back to God.

Part of the God problem, I think, is that too many Jews have the impression that the Jewish people have produced basically one image of the divine over the past three millenia—the Old Man in the Sky, or some other version of the human-like God character who pops up throughout the Bible, getting angry and smiting people and then forgiving and trying again. The truth is, that even in the Bible God is a bit more elusive and complicated than that. And the bigger truth is, that in all the succeeding generations of Jews—from the rabbis of the Talmud to the medieval philosophers, from Spanish kabbalists to American feminists—there are as many images of God as there are Jewish opinions—which is to say, a lot.

I want to give you just a taste of this variety of Jewish conversations about God; it’s very rich, and sometimes surprising, and heartening to know that our tradition can hold wildly different notions of something that we call One.

The rabbis whose teachings are recorded in the Talmud and in the midrash were like Mordecai Kaplan in one way—they were more interested in talking about how we experience God than in big abstract ideas about God. They were different from Kaplan in that they weren’t afraid to use any image available to them to talk about God; they especially loved human images for God, knowing full well that these images were their own projections. One *midrash* says:

Because God appeared to the Israelites at the Red Sea like a hero in battle, at Sinai like a scribe instructing them in Torah, and in the days of Daniel like an elderly teacher, God said to them: “Just because you see Me in many images, this does not mean there are many gods. I, the God of Sinai, am also the God of the Red Sea.”

At first it seems that the rabbis are speaking quite literally about God in human terms—as a hero, a scribe, a teacher. But the rabbis were wiser than that. They aren’t really talking about God here; they are talking about us. They are making the point that our perception of God depends on our experience, and that different experiences—crossing the Red Sea, standing at Sinai—produce different symbolic images of a power that contains all these images, and goes far beyond them.

The midrash goes on:

... Said Rabbi Levi: [At Sinai], God appeared to them like a statue which looks in every direction. A thousand people look at it, and it looks at each of them. Thus when God spoke to Israel, each Jew said: “It is to me that the voice is speaking.” “*I am YHWH thy God*”—in the singular, not the plural. (*Pesikta d’Rav Kahana*)

So, according to this—not only does our perception of what we’re calling “God” depend on our life circumstance, but even beyond that, an encounter with divinity is a totally personal and subjective experience. Standing at Sinai, each Israelite felt as if the Godly words were directly aimed at him or her. The rabbis wanted to claim that there is only one God, only one ultimate reality, but our experience and description of that reality depends on where we are, and who we are.

Hundreds of years later, in a very different setting, the Jewish philosopher Maimonides wrestled with a different issue: how could someone like him—an intellectual, a scientist, a highly rational person—be committed to the Torah and also embrace the philosophy of Aristotle, which dominated the Arab intellectual world he lived in? In that world, God couldn’t be a personified Being who spoke and rescued people and got angry; that kind of conception was for children. Maimonides’ answer was to describe a God that is as far from the God of the Bible as you can imagine—a formless, unknowable realm of pure Intellect that is unchanging and entirely perfect. The Torah speaks in human terms, Maimonides argued, for the benefit of those who are not trained or intelligent enough to understand the truth of things. Maimonides described a Jewish God that was perfectly in line with what was considered the height of rational thought in his time.

What’s interesting is that Maimonides’ conception of God never really caught on in the Jewish world. Besides being extremely abstract, it was, perhaps, too distant from the human experiences that give birth to God language in the first place. But his attempt to talk about God in a way that would not contradict the science of his day was important, and influenced thinkers like Mordecai Kaplan who tried to do the same in the modern era.

One of the most interesting, and complicated, Jewish conversations about God comes from the mystical tradition, the kabbalah, - which began in 13th century Spain and had enormous impact on Jewish communities throughout the world. In a way that was much more sophisticated than the early rabbis but much more accessible than Maimonides, the kabbalists were able to conceptualize and talk about a God that is beyond knowing and beyond description, yet Who is able to connect with us and influence our world.

Kabbalah is very complicated—it's the equivalent of advanced physics in the mystical realm, so I won't attempt to do it justice here. But there is one kabbalistic myth, created by Rabbi Isaac Luria in the 16th century, that gives you a good taste of this approach. Luria, like other kabbalists, spoke of a God who can only be known as Ein Sof, "Without End"—an entity or power that is entirely beyond our ability to understand or relate to. At some point this power contracted itself and made space for the creation of our universe. Light emanated out of the Ein Sof, into the space that had been created. But in this process of creation, something went wrong—a kind of cosmic shattering occurred. Because of this shattering, divine light—sparks of energy that radiated out from the Ein Sof—"fell" into this world. These sparks of light became trapped within the material world. In this understanding, Godliness—in the form of these "sparks"—permeate our material world, even though the ultimate Source, the Ein Sof, is still beyond us. The job of Jews, according to Luria, is to "liberate" these sparks, to send them back to their divine source, through our actions. We release sparks by doing mitzvot, ethical and ritual practices, with the proper intention. In the mystical understanding, we are literally partners with God, making a repair of the cosmic shattering by the way we live our lives.

Other thinkers in more recent years have gone in very different directions in talking about God. Mordecai Kaplan redefined God not as a Being who is above the natural realm, but as a Power that works within nature and within us, moving us towards "salvation," towards the fulfillment of our human potential. Jewish feminist thinkers have challenged the traditional Jewish imagery of God as exclusively male, and have pointed out how hierarchical images of God as King reinforce unequal power relationships within Jewish community. Jewish feminism has been revolutionary in opening up our thinking about and naming of God, exploring feminine imagery and arguing that any transcendent concept of God is problematic.

It's both exhilarating and confusing to try to take in all these extremely different approaches to one God. Arthur Green, who is a contemporary Reconstructionist thinker, understands it this way:

"All the images through which we depict the divine, both personal and nonpersonal, are human creations. The reality toward which we are reaching through those images is entirely real. It is in fact the essence of reality itself. But its nature is so subtle, the manner of its existence so profound, that *only* by means of projected images can we address it... "God" is in that sense a symbol, a human creation that we need to use in order to illuminate for ourselves, however inadequately, some tiny portion of the infinite mystery." (*The Reconstructionist*, 9/88)

Our language is limited, but it's all we have. The danger of using any image is that we'll get stuck in it and falsely believe that the partial symbol that we've created is in fact Reality. But we can't escape our need for language to help us find meaning in the world. Can you imagine having an intimate relationship with someone, a real and enduring relationship, and never learning that person's name? If they didn't tell you their name, you would have to make one up; you would need to call them something. And the name you gave them would take on meaning for you, it would come to encapsulate all that you felt about that person and all that you knew about them. We give a name, and the name takes on power.

A number of years ago I had an interesting experience, sitting in a Baskin Robbins ice cream shop. There I was, in the home of 31 flavors, and in walked a young child and his father. The little boy couldn't read the list of flavors, so he asked his dad, what can I have? And his father glanced up at the board listing every possible flavor of ice cream that you can imagine, and he said: "They have chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry."

Now, I don't want to second-guess this parent; he probably knew full well what his son would eat, or maybe he didn't want to be there all day as the kid decided. But in that moment I felt sad for the little boy. He had no idea of the wonderful variety spread out before him in the ice cream case! Just chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry.

The problem with the word "God" is that for many of us it functions like that father in the ice cream shop—limiting our imagination, shutting down our perceptions, making us feel like we only have a few choices, and bad choices at that. But that's only because we can't read the flavors for ourselves; we've let others define our religious language for us.

And so, I would say today to my friend Adam from Habonim: I use the word "God" because I love this 3,000 year-old Jewish conversation, and I want to be a part of it. When I say "God" I know I'm not conjuring up the same image as the prophet Isaiah or Maimonides or a kabbalist or Mordecai Kaplan. But I learn something from all these people, I learn from the wisdom of those who have gone before me. And then I can add my own definition to the mix. There are things I need to find out, and I need a way to talk about them.

I like to ask people to describe to me their spirituality, to tell me how and where they have what they would call spiritual or Godly experiences. I have received so many different and powerful answers. For one person, it's being in a beautifully constructed building that gives a sense of awe and dimension; for someone else, it's floating in a kayak, feeling close to water and blue herons; for another, it's experiencing the birth of a child, or being in community, or emerging alive from a car accident. For some people, it's important to have a "You," a Someone out there, to pray to; for others, a "You" gets in the way, and Godliness is experienced as a life-giving force that cannot be separated from the world we live in. When I say "God" I mean something that somehow includes all of this, and even more, within it.

The world of Jewish myth and symbols—a language which includes actions as well as words—teaches me how to look at reality in a way that allows me to embrace it even as I admit that I can't fully understand it. It teaches me, as Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, to experience "radical amazement" as I gaze at the cosmos, to never take my existence or the world around me for granted. It reminds me that we human beings are not the be-all and end-all of creation, but that we stand in relation to something that demands our humility and our respect. Jewish tradition teaches that we are created in the image of God—we have Godliness within us—but we are not God. At a time when the literal power to create life is now in our hands, this may be the most important reminder of all.

My fear is that we'll let our discomfort with old ideas about God shut us off from Godly experiences. The Jewish God has become a symbol that's broken down for many Jews, and it can be tempting to just walk away from the whole thing. But we lose something in that; we lose a pathway that

keeps us open to Reality. We let 31 flavors get reduced to 3. When we lose big words like God, we run the danger of worshipping smaller things in place of God—like money, or a country, or our own power. And if we conclude that nothing demands our gratitude and amazement, the world can become a very small and hopeless place.

There's no doubt that religious language can be perverted; it happens all the time. Anything can become an idol—including the Torah. Human beings can twist any story and any system of symbols for negative ends; people have been oppressed and killed in the name of socialism, in the name of democracy, and, very sadly, in the name of God. But that doesn't mean we should abandon any of those ideas. It's precisely because of the danger of religious idolatry that I want lots of different voices in this Jewish conversation—so that we can keep each other honest. We need lots of names for God, to remind us that one name can never capture reality. We need names for God that make us look in new places for Godliness. We need names for God that keep us on a path of justice and compassion.

And like any good conversation, we need not just to speak, but also to listen. If there is a name “out there,” there is a name in here, as well; each calls to the other. At the end of the Unetaneh Tokef prayer, part of the Musaf service, the liturgist says these words to God:

Shimcha na'eh lecha - your name is perfectly suited to you

v'atah na'eh l'shimcha - and you are perfectly suited to your name

u-shmenu karata vishmecha - and to us you have called, by your name.

We can only experience ultimate Truth through the name that we give it. The teaching here in this prayer is that in the act of searching for and giving a name, our own name is called—that name which is the Godliness within us. We're part of the conversation, and the conversation is part of us—so let the talking begin.

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