

The Blessing of Uncertainty *Rosh Hashanah 5766*

Introduction

I feel like I'm hearing a lot about "truth" these days. There seem to be a lot of people, both here in America and around the world, who have a very clear idea about what truth is. Whether it's folks on the Christian right, or Muslim fundamentalists, or the Catholic hierarchy here in Massachusetts talking about gay marriage, the one thing that seems consistent is the argument that there is a clear, definable truth, a truth that originates with God, and that some people know exactly what that truth is. And precisely because of how most of these people think about God, their truth always seems to have a reactionary character. It seems that their truth is held on to most fervently when it acts as an obstacle to change.

Now, one way to deal with this problem would be to downplay, or even dispose of, the whole notion of God. This argument would be that any God-centered notion of truth is bound to be inherently rigid and reactionary. But I don't think we can get rid of God as easily as that—or that we'd even want to. I'd like to suggest instead that we need to re-approach and re-appropriate the idea of God, for a few reasons.

I would argue that the best response to bad ideas about God—ideas that lead to violence or intolerance or any kind of harm—is not to deny that there is such a thing as God, or to condemn religion as a source of social evil. Much better, to my mind, would be to foster ways of thinking about and talking about God that correspond to our experience of reality, and that match our ideals for how we would like reality to be. Because if we can actually find language that more accurately and wholesomely describes this aspect of reality, then we have some power to help shape how people think and how they act. And what is religion about, ultimately, if not getting people to think and act in ways that are wholesome, that are holy?

As a rabbi, it's also important to me how we understand God because for so many people this remains an obstacle to fully connecting with Jewish life and practice. If the only God ideas we encounter feel untenable, problematic, even harmful, then how can we, why should we participate in Jewish religious practices?

On a personal level, it's important to me to be able to talk about what God is, what this might mean, because of my own experiences of coming into relationship with something in the universe that is beyond myself. For me, Jewish and spiritual practice in general has been about an ongoing process of opening myself to this Power, orienting myself to the universe in such a way that I can experience blessing and can receive direction. I experience this Power as something that obligates me, that calls me to serve. But for me it's not enough just to experience this. I want to know—I need to know: what I am in service to? And how, then, do I serve?

Experience vs. Conception

An important influence and source of inspiration for me in this inquiry is the writing of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism. Kaplan made a very helpful distinction when it comes to talking about God—the distinction between our *experience* of God or Godliness, and our *conception* of God.

Kaplan argued that religious life begins with “the intuitive experience of cosmic Power upon which we depend for our existence and self-fulfillment.” For Kaplan, there is a fundamental human experience of the divine which stems from our interactions with the awesomeness of the natural world, and from our ongoing search for meaning and self-fulfillment. However much such an experience might vary from individual to individual, at its core it is universal in nature, it is not determined by a people’s cultural or historical situation .

What does develop and change, according to Kaplan, is what he called people’s “conception” of God—the images, the metaphors and language we use to give form and shape to our encounters with a Power that lies both within and beyond us. And one of the main problems with Judaism in the modern era, he argued, was that our conception of God has not kept pace with fundamental changes in how we now understand the world around us.

Kaplan began writing in the first decades of the 20th century, as a new model of physical reality was taking hold in the scientific community—the theories of quantum mechanics. In this model, reality can no longer be thought of as static. Energy can become matter, and vice versa; the most elemental building blocks of the universe can act as particles or as waves. At its most basic level, physical reality is flux, change, flow. To match this shift in our basic understanding of physical reality, Kaplan argued that thinking about God as a kind of static, identifiable Supreme Person or Being no longer makes sense, that instead we need to think about God as a Process or a Power, something more in line with how we understand the workings of the Universe.

Kaplan, however, was not that interested in coming up with a coherent metaphysics, an overall theory to explain reality and God’s place in it. While he proposed some new ways of thinking about God, he also left huge gaps that beg for further exploration.

So while I start with Kaplan, I have turned to those who have drawn out in a more systematic way some of the implications of thinking about God in this new way. This past year, during my sabbatical, I did some reading in process theology, a school of thought that has grown out of the work of the of the 20th century philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne. In process theology I have discovered ideas that seem to be a good fit with some very fundamental Jewish teachings. The reality is that Judaism has an incredibly rich treasure trove of ideas about God, most of which, unfortunately, remain much less well known than the Cecil B. DeMille version of the divine. And it is that classic, problematic vision of God that I’d like to address today.

God and Change

One of the most unfortunate ideas about God that entered into Jewish theology some time in the medieval period is the notion that God never changes. The argument in classic Christian as well as Jewish theology goes like this: if God can change, it means God might *need* to change, which

would mean God can't be perfect (because if something is already perfect it would never need to change). God by definition has to be perfect, because how could a less-than-perfect being be worthy of our worship? So, this argument goes, while the world changes, and people change, God Godself is somehow beyond change. The notion of God never changing includes the idea that God is all-knowing. God never learns—which would be a change in God's knowledge -- because God already knows it all.

The problem, Jewishly speaking, is that if we look at the Torah, it appears that God changes all the time! The God depicted in the Torah is on a continual learning curve. The stories of Genesis are wonderful and powerful because we, the reader, learn along with God. What will happen when human beings eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden? In the Garden, God learns, as do we, about human free will. God then learns about people's capacity for murder, when Adam and Eve's first children, Cain and Abel, get into humanity's first deadly fight. When human violence and wrongdoing get totally out of hand, God changes God's mind, and decides to bring a flood to wipe out nearly all of Creation. The God of Genesis is a Being, a Power, in a constant process of evolution, of learning, of change.

Now, you could make the argument—and the argument has been made—that the way God is depicted in the Torah is relatively primitive and simplistic. This argument would be that the God of the philosophers, the God of Maimonides for example, is far more sophisticated than anything represented in the Torah. Maimonides himself rationalized much of the Torah's God language by saying that on the literal level, the Torah spoke in terms that a simple Jew could understand.

But I would argue quite the opposite—that using a particular kind of literary form, using mythic language that depicts God in very human terms, the authors of the Torah were in fact trying to convey some very sophisticated, complex notions of divinity.

For me, the most important of those ideas is revealed in the third chapter of the book of Exodus, when Moses encounters God at the burning bush. Moses, who's been roaming around the desert as a shepherd, is suddenly addressed by a divine being that tells him to go back to Egypt and liberate the Israelites from slavery. Moses asks, who should I say sent me? What is Your name?

The answer comes in three words: *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*. The most literal meaning of those words is: I will be that I will be. I can think of no less static or unchanging a name for God than this: *I will be that I will be*. The God that redeems, that liberates the Jews from Egypt, is all about Becoming. This sense of process, of becoming, is encapsulated in the name of God that we are familiar with in our liturgy—Y-H-V-H, a name we no longer know how to pronounce, and instead call "Adonai." As Rabbi Arthur Green writes:

"This name of God [Y -H-W-H] is the starting point of all Jewish theology. It is to be read as an impossible construction of the verb "to be"... *Y-H-W-H is a verb that has been artificially arrested in motion and made to function as a noun...* Try to say anything definitional about Y-H-W-H and it dashes off and becomes a verb again. This elusiveness is underscored by the fact that all the letters that make up this name served in ancient Hebrew interchangeably as consonants and as vowels. Really they are mere vowels, mere breath. There is nothing hard or defined in their sound. **The name of that which is most**

eternal and unchanging in the universe is also that which is wiped away as readily as a passing breath . . .” (*Seek My Face, Speak My Name*, p. 19)

These two aspects of YHVH also make up our experience of reality—the sense of continuity in time, the reality of the past which flows into and shapes the present—along with that which is constantly changing, coming into being, changing from moment to moment.

A fundamental notion of the early rabbis is the idea that Creation is actively sustained and brought into being anew, each moment and each day, by the Creative Life of the universe. In the morning liturgy we bless *ha-m'chadesh b'chol yom tamid maasei bereshit*—the One who makes new every day the work of Creation. In contrast to the unchanging God of the philosophers, this dynamic Power is part of an ongoing process of creativity and change, is the cosmic Source of newness in the world. In the words of John Cobb and David Griffin, two contemporary process theologians: “It is God who, by confronting the world with unrealized opportunities, opens up a space for freedom and self-creativity.” God in this understanding is the ultimate Power of creativity, the potentiality of all potentialities. Yod-Hay-Vav-Hay is the Jewish name for this power, this process, that urges us towards ever-more complex and integrated levels of existence.

So this is the first important idea about God that I'd like us to consider. If God changes, in fact if God is the ultimate potentiality of all potentialities—**then change is Godly**. Perfection does not lie in achieving some final state of completeness. In fact, we could argue that such a state is impossible. Change, development, evolution, are not just natural aspects of material reality—*they are its most Godly aspects*. As Kaplan argued, “creativity, or the continuous emergence of aspects of life not prepared for or determined by the past, **constitutes the most divine phase of reality**...For God is the Creator, and that which seems impossible today [God] may bring to birth tomorrow.” (*Meaning Of God*, pp. 62, 67)

It is this foundational Jewish idea about God that gives us hope in the possibility of real transformation. One key aspect of religious faith is the faith that the universe is constructed in such a way as to support our efforts towards change and growth, that part of our Godly task here on earth is the very act of partnership in the process of becoming.

God and Power

Another problematic notion about God is the idea that God is “all -powerful,” meaning that, theoretically, God can do whatever God wants. The kind of power that this picture of God assumes is coercive power, the power to control other beings completely. In such a scenario, God has all the power, and nothing and no one else, in either the natural or human realms, can exert meaningful power, because if God is indeed all-powerful, than God can nullify any action taken by another.

It is interesting to reflect on why certain religious traditions have come to understand Godly power as a power that admits of no mistakes, that can do whatever it wants. Perhaps originally this came from an anxiety about the relative lack of control that we human beings have in certain realms. As we have been painfully reminded in recent weeks, human beings can influence the forces of nature, but we can't ultimately control those forces. We can't control hurricanes or

tsunamis; we can't control when we are born, or how many years we are given to live. In the face of such human powerlessness, many religious traditions have imagined a divine Being that is indeed in total control—a cosmic Power that just might, if we implore it in the right way, make conditions more favorable for us.

Yet by imagining a Being that decrees each and every event in the natural realm and in each human life, people have in essence created an image of God that, if translated to the human plane, we would call a tyrant, a dictator who can control everything in the universe. But why? Why would we want to call that kind of power the most Godly kind of power? By projecting our own human urge for control, our own unhealthy fantasies of absolute power onto God, we have made holy an idea that is the opposite of holy.

Now I have no doubt that the Source of Life, that which brought this universe into being, is indeed an awesome Power, something certainly beyond my imagining. And our religious tradition teaches that it is appropriate at times to be apprehensive before such a Power, and to recognize our relative smallness in the cosmic context of things. The early rabbis of the Mishnah taught that when we witness awesome, potentially life-threatening natural events, like earthquakes and hurricanes, we are to recite, “Blessed is the One whose power and might fill the universe” (Brachot 9:2). The High Holyday liturgy reminds us that “all of humanity is founded on dust..like vessels of clay, they can break, like grass they wither, like flowers they fade, like shadows they pass, like clouds, they become empty.”

Yet even with this awareness, we need not imagine the divine Source of Being as a Power that controls each and every detail of creation. We do not need to imagine a God that cannot allow for the reality of chance and imperfection in the evolution of the cosmos. If creativity and change are real, if the divine process unfolding within and around us entails ever-more complex levels of conscious life, then that process of necessity must allow for the not-always-orderly complexity of life as it is. This in no way makes it less powerful, less awesome.

When it comes to the issue of human free will, and the relation of human power to God's power, the Torah takes very seriously the notion that power is not the monopoly of the Holy One. From the very beginning of the book of Genesis, God does not, cannot, control what human beings do. Human power and human choice are real. The Torah begins with a choice—Adam and Eve's choice to eat from the Tree of knowledge of good and evil—and the Torah ends with a choice: Moses' challenge to the Israelites to choose life, to choose to do good. For the Torah, choice is real, human freedom is real, and God spends most of the Five Books of Moses dealing with the messy reality of human beings' power to choose and to act.

What I have learned from my reading of process theology is that accepting the reality of human freedom does *not* mean that we need to think of God as somehow powerless or irrelevant in the realm of human action. Rather, people have made the mistake of attributing to God only one kind of power—coercive power; a complete power *over*. In the terminology of Process Theology, we should instead imagine God in relation to human beings as exercising “persuasive power.”

Again, I'll return to the narrative of Moses at the burning bush. Moses learns two things about God in this encounter. One is that which I discussed earlier—God as *Ehyeh asher Ehyeh*, as the

transformative process of Becoming. But Moses also learns in this moment that YHVH is a power that responds to suffering—a power that hears the cries of the Israelites in slavery, and then acts to begin a process of liberation. YHVH urges Moses to become God’s partner in the task of redeeming this slave people. Moses is given a choice: to stay an anonymous shepherd, or to take on leadership as a prophet and community leader. Moses resists God’s demands mightily, but in the end he returns to Egypt and begins the long process of liberating the Israelites.

This Torah story is a metaphor for God exercising persuasive, not coercive, power. In this understanding, God is that which offers an ideal toward which we strive, is the Power which urges us to respond to suffering, to seek our own and other’s fulfillment. In the language of the prophets, God implants within us and in the world around us the Godly forces of *tzedek*, justice, and *chesed*, lovingkindness. This manifestation of Godly power encourages us to do the good, and offers direction if we seek to learn how to follow it. It cannot *make* us act for the good; as we know all too well, people can always choose to do evil. But what our tradition teaches is that there will be consequences for defying the Godly path that inheres in our natures.

On the individual level, our souls suffer when we consistently seek to do harm. On the level of community and society, there are disastrous consequences when the forces of greed, of human arrogance, of fear and small-mindedness prevail. The basic Jewish teaching is that when we choose life, when we choose the path of justice and love, the Godly power of the universe is on our side. In the words, again, of Mordecai Kaplan: “This is the faith that reality, the cosmos.. is so constituted that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation, **provided, of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands.**” (*Future of the American Jew*, p. 182)

It is in the context of this understanding of Godly “persuasive power” that I would suggest a Reconstructionist understanding of the traditional notion of “mitzvah,” holy obligation. With a process understanding of God, we do not have to choose between a fundamentalist understanding of Godly commands on the one hand, and a total moral relativism on the other. But how can we preserve a sense of obligation, of something being demanded of us as Jews, as human beings, once we reject the idea of the all-powerful, commanding God?

Traditional Judaism understands “halakha,” Jewish ritual and ethical law, as a set of commandments revealed by God, and interpreted over time by those with rabbinic authority. In contrast, a Reconstructionist understanding is that God does not reveal Godself to us, rather we discover God. We discover how God works and what God wants of us in our exploration of the laws of the natural universe, and in the development of our moral and spiritual sensibility. Our spiritual and ethical goal, then, is “to know and understand enough” about the reality of the cosmos “to be able to conform to its demands.”

Kaplan would argue, and I would agree with him, that Creation is not random. The existence of human beings and other conscious creatures indicates a universe that contains within it the source of and the potential for our continued growth and well-being. But our tradition is very clear that we are not granted those blessings without a deep level of commitment on our part. To fully realize ourselves as human beings, and to preserve the very viability of life on this planet—

we are indeed “commanded” on some level. We need a discipline, a system of practice, that will help align us with that which contributes to life and to blessing. To conform to the demands of the cosmos, we are obligated to create the kinds of social structures necessary to allow all of humanity to live as fully and as sustainably as possible.

The Blessing of Uncertainty

I want to finish with some thoughts about the implications of what it might mean to embrace the ideas about God that I have discussed this morning.

If we accept the notion of God as a Power, a Process, that embodies change and transformation, then it is wrong—perhaps even blasphemous—to for any religious community to claim that they know “God’s word,” and that it is set and unchanging for all time. If God is the Source of all potentiality and change, always achieving new levels of possibility, how in the world could our human understanding of “God’s word” ever be final? This is perhaps the worst kind of idolatry—the human arrogance of knowing “the truth,” once and for all. It is this kind of certainty that motivates those who oppress in the name of God. And it is no coincidence that those who are most certain—whether they are Jewish or Christian or Muslim or Hindu—also tend to be the most authoritarian, the most liable to impose a coercive power that they associate with their understanding of God.

On the level of our daily lives, if we come to an understanding of God as the Power that embodies and exemplifies creativity, change, and ongoing transformation, then we can embrace as Godly the reality of uncertainty, risk, and chance in our own spiritual journeys. We can take seriously the deepest teaching of the story of the Exodus: that real freedom is like a journey into the wilderness—a journey which promises encounter with the divine and new teachings about how to live a full human life, but that also inherently brings risk of conflict and suffering.

Often in our lives we do our utmost to exert control. We tend to believe that if we could just control as much of our lives as possible, we will be less likely to suffer, less likely to lose that which we care about. But the reality is that our desire for control more often increases our suffering—because we find ourselves fighting the reality of our lives. We become unable to live within that reality, when we really don’t have any other choice. On some level, our desire for control is the root of idolatry, because what are idols if not human-made artifacts that can be manipulated by their creators? To allow for glimpses of Godliness in our lives, to open ourselves to an ongoing awareness of God’s presence in this world—to do this, we need to learn to live with the blessing of uncertainty.

To bless uncertainty is to understand and accept the limits of our own human power in the face of the awesome mysteries of Creation. It is to accept the fragility and temporary nature of our own lives as a part of God’s creation. It is to accept the very real risks of our human freedom, to acknowledge the reality of suffering—our own suffering and the suffering of others. Out of that experience comes compassion, and an understanding of God’s nature as *El chanun v’rachum*, the gracious and compassionate One.

To bless uncertainty is, in the prophet Micah's words, to "walk modestly with God," as we seek to do justice and to love goodness. We may feel very deeply our commitments to creating holy community, to building a just society—but how do we act on those commitments with the right mix of conviction and humility? How do we maintain an attitude of willingness to learn, an openness to an ongoing unfolding of Truth, when we are trying to act on deeply held values and ideals? To "walk in modesty with God" means that we are always learning how we are to bring justice and love into our lives, into our communities and our societies. To embrace uncertainty does not mean to make all truth relative, to throw morality out the window, to say that anything goes. It is, rather, to bring a very traditional sort of humility to the project of understanding what is asked of us by the universe.

I'd like to close with a final blessing—the *bracha achrona*, quite literally. This blessing, which is said at the end of eating a simple meal, includes these words: Blessed are you, Adonai, who creates many and various living beings with their *hisronot*, their deficiencies. As Jews, we bless our *hisronot*, our lacks, our needs—those empty spaces that are not yet filled. We bless our uncertainties.

Let us bless those spaces waiting to be filled with the Godliness within us and around us, the Godliness that is waiting to become manifest through our words and our deeds.

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