

You don't need to believe in God to be Jewish. You can be a great Jew and an atheist. But you cannot believe that YOU are God. We are not God. We are humans. If you think you're God, you're wrong. You are idolatrous. You have sinned.

NARCISSISM IS HERESY

That's really the message of the Book of Exodus and, to some extent, Numbers and Leviticus. The narrative is all about a battle between God and Pharaoh. Pharaoh thought he was God. He was omnipotent. He was the ruler over all he saw. He was all powerful. He could order death of newborn children. He could enslave people. He acted with impunity. He, himself, was the law. Most importantly he believed he was immortal.

But we know better. Pharaoh wasn't God, and God would prove it, not just by being more powerful, but by being more God like. Pharaoh was a pale substitute for the true God. God-- Adonai the Eternal One-- that is the real God. Here is how the true God acts: God frees the slaves, and then commands, "Thou shall observe the Sabbath--Shabbat." Every week, one day a week, beginning on Friday evening, you are to have a day of rest, but not just a day off from work, rather a day on which you can be fulfilled and find spiritual meaning in your life.

What would Pharaoh say? Take a day off? Every single week? That would be the opposite of slavery. What does Pharaoh care if his slaves are spiritually fulfilled? If by chance there is a day off from labor, it would be by an act of capriciousness, done by whim. Pharaoh built pyramids of stone. God understood Maslow's pyramid ----humans are meant to achieve self-actualization. And God wanted that for us.

The true God stated: "Bring me gifts, but only if your heart so moves you." Pharaoh demanded tribute, as would any despot, but he had absolutely no concern about whether the slaves wanted to do so or not. The real God said: "Let them build me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." God wants to be near us. Pharaoh wants to be as distant as possible, living in a palace as inaccessible to ordinary folk as imaginable, a golden tower far removed from the messiness of mere mortals.

God says in Leviticus: "You shall be Holy, for I the Eternal your God am Holy." God wants us to aspire to be like God--Imitatio Dei--Imitation of God. Pharaoh would want nothing of the sort. It would be inconceivable that Pharaoh would say: "Try to be like me." Unimaginable!

But most of all, the real God has to prove to Pharaoh--the false God-- that Pharaoh is not divine. Pharaoh will die. Only the real God is immortal. Pharaoh is not God. He is simply human, imperfect, frail, and mortal.

It is too easy for us to think that we are Pharaoh. We might presume to have power. We can live lives isolated from the nasty stuff of the real world. Some live in penthouses atop Fifth Avenue Golden Towers. It is far too easy in a world of privilege and power to delude ourselves into thinking that we, like Pharaoh, are Godlike. That is the definition of the extreme narcissistic personality. It is all about me. I can do it all--alone. I am a great success. I am invincible. I know more than everyone else. I can do anything I want. I am entitled. I am a star!

I am speaking not of politics or even psychology. This is theology. Extreme narcissism is idolatry. It goes against the first of the Ten Commandments, the one that is key to all the rest, I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other Gods in place of Me. YOU should not be God.

In all honesty, we are not in the habit of worshipping clay statues or tree gods or inanimate rocks. We do not build literal Golden Calves. That is not what idolatry means in our lives. Our form of idolatry is the worship of self, imagining that WE are God. Idolatry is an affront to God--- even though you don't have to believe in God.

Most of the time when we retell the story of Pharaoh and Egypt, I say that we are commanded to remember that we were slaves in Egypt so that we know that we must protect the outcast, the stranger, and fight against slavery and oppression. But there is another lesson we must take from Egypt: Don't become Pharaoh!

Despots, dictators, and demagogues are self-indulgent and self-reverential. For them, it is always about self. To return to theology, how do we understand God in a non-anthropomorphic, non-supernatural conception? The Biblical story in Genesis posits the first human---Adam-- emerging from Adamah---earth. We are earthling from earth, human from humus. God breathes into Adam "ruach Elohim" - the breath of God. That is what animates us. It is our spirit and soul. We carry that spirit within ourselves. We are God containers.

Martin Buber defined the concept of "I-Thou." If we are all, in fact, God containers, then we perceive the Divine in each other. We find God, in the meeting between my God container and your God container. That is the "Thou" to my "I."

Narcissus gazed upon his visage in the mirror-like surface of a pond. He was too entranced by the image of himself to allow room for any other person in the reflection. He could see only himself. The person who can see only oneself is, in many ways, denying the God in the other. Even worse is the person who perceives everyone else as merely an object to be used. The "I-Thou" becomes "I-It." The other is only there to be manipulated for one's own pleasure. They can be groped, kissed against their will, or assaulted.

Hillel said: "Im ayn ani li, Mi li?" "If I am not for myself, who will be for me?" BUT, Hillel went on to state: "Im Raq ani li, Mah li?" "But if I am only for myself, then what am I?" That lesson helps define the decent, fully ethical human being.

Let us return to the story of Pharaoh. It turns out that he is a pale substitution, an imposter, of the real God. But the battle is not just between Pharaoh and God. It is also between Pharaoh and Moses. Compare Pharaoh to Moses, human to human. It is not just that Pharaoh is not a real God, Pharaoh is not a real man. It is a contrast between a true leader and a despot. Moses could have been Pharaoh. He was raised in the royal palace. He had wealth, privilege, and entitlement. But Moses chose to go out amidst his people, eventually escaping Egypt for Sinai.

God appeared to Moses at the burning bush and called out to him: "Moses, Moses!"

Moses replied: "Hineini." "I am here."

God said: "I have heard the plight of my people in Egypt. I will send you to Pharaoh, and you shall free My people."

But Moses said to God: "Mi Anochi:" "Who am I?"

"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?"

And God said: "I will be with you."

Moses displayed humility and self-awareness. He demonstrated one of the key attributes of true leadership, asking: "Who am I?"

So what is our lesson? The take away? We are not God. God is Eternal. We aren't. Humans are mortal. That is the ultimate proof that we are not God. We die. Only God is immortal--Eternal. And because we die--and know we will die-- life is meaningful.

Moses, unlike Pharaoh, understands this. He dies by a gentle kiss from God. Just as Adam is animated by that first breath of Divine within him, so God, in the end, takes the final breath away from Moses. Let us always remember that we, too, are human. None of us should be so presumptuous as to think that we are God. Anything else is idolatry. Narcissism is heresy. It is more than a psychological disorder; it is a desecration of God's name.

Pharaoh thought he was God and that he would live forever. He forced his slaves to build tombs and pyramids to contain his riches for the afterlife. I have been to Cairo, Giza, and Siqqara. I can report back that the Pyramids are empty. Tomb robbers, thieves, and looters have long since taken away the riches. There is nothing left, only hollow edifices.

The poet Shelley wrote in "Ozymandias:"
"I met a traveler from an ancient land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert....
....And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look at my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

So too the life of a Pharaoh and his great monuments to himself, and others like him. His name might be emblazoned on the pedestal of a destroyed statue or on the façade of a golden tower. But over the course of time, nothing remains, just barren sand. The narcissist is an idolater of the self, but time and history will eventually reduce his reputation to dust.

Yes, only God is Eternal, but there is still a form of immortality available to each of us: the good name, the wondrous works of timeless teachings, the sweet memories of moral leadership. Moses achieved his own form of immortality. Yom Kippur begins the same way in every synagogue throughout the world, as has been done through thousands of years. The Torahs are removed from the Holy Ark and brought out for all in the congregation to see. "This is the Torah which Moses brought before the people of Israel, by the word of God and the hand of Moses."

Moses' memory is invoked across the millennia and across the world. Who was Moses? The one who asked: "Who am I?" We stand before the ark and are taught: "Dah Lifnei Mi Atah Omed." "Know before Whom you stand."

Let us always remember who we are and who we can strive to be. Let us never be seduced or led astray by a mere human who acts as if he is God. Let us recognize that which is greater than ourselves, but let us always seek to discover the true greatness that is within ourselves. Then our lives will be meaningful, fulfilled and blessed. Amen.

Rabbi Samuel N. Gordon
Kol Nidre 5777
October 11, 2016