

Someone driving to a meeting was running late. The traffic was horrendous and by the time he got where he was going the closest parking lot was full. As he weaved along the rows of parked cars, he prayed, "God, if you get me a parking spot, I promise to attend synagogue every week – and I'll give generously *tzedakah*." Not two seconds later he noticed an empty spot. The man raised his eyes heavenward and said, "Never mind; I found one."

We laugh, in part, because we all know some promises – even to God - are hard to keep. Yet there is in this tale a deep-rooted belief that if we just do the right things, say the proper words or perform the appropriate rituals (including showing up today), everything will somehow turn out all right.

You certainly could make the point that religion in general and Judaism, in particular, sees God as a Judge who equitably distributes benefits to believers and punishes those who turn aside. The Torah explicitly states that God sets good and evil before us. If we follow the right path we will be blessed; if not, destroyed. The Yom Kippur confessional reinforces the image of God who creates a world that would somehow be perfect, if it weren't for our screw-ups:

We have turned aside from Your commandments and from Your precepts, and it has not availed us. You are just; whatever befalls us. You call us to righteousness, but we bring evil upon ourselves.

In short, when the universe goes awry – a superstorm bringing the ocean into our bedroom, a spot on the scan upending our lives – it's *our* fault.

I don't know about you, but I find this view of God as "vending machine" - insert good, get reward – unsatisfying. And its corollary – punishment is the just deserts for sin – is not only cruel, but false.

Even before I became I became a rabbi I had already lost too much to believe in a God who neatly weighs out justice. I have buried children who did nothing wrong, seen righteous people betrayed and witnessed the wicked go unpunished. Does the tsunami that takes hundreds of thousands only snuff out the unworthy? Can I square the murder of school children in a terror attack as due – as I once heard a rabbi claim – to the classroom *mezzuzot* scrolls not being *kosher*? Such a theology is not only misguided; it is reprehensible. As our

daughter battled a rare cancer this year, I could not accept – nor could our daughter – that there was some Divine justice in her “losing” this lousy lottery.

In the face of such pain and misfortune, and those who justify it in religious terms, it is no surprise that some turn away from God. A few weeks ago someone wrote me that she thinks that religion (and the God religious faith affirms) creates only conflict and division. It certainly is true that the belief in God, when aligned with political ideology or military power, has caused – and continues to cause – tremendous harm. Prominent atheists, such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins, offer scathing attacks on religion for foisting on humanity the idea of a God that demands obedience, has to be feared and who punishes unbelievers.

But the God they deny – and which turns so many to abandon faith – I long ago gave up. I've seen too much to believe in a God who hears my prayers as I look for a parking place or who, because of my piety, generosity or good actions, will ensure that everything turns out just fine. I am too jaded by knowing how the narrow-minded and intolerant have used religion to destroy and murder to trust (much less believe) any kind of fundamentalist faith. It is not just the good who prosper or only the wicked who suffer.

If you think it is heresy to say such things, you should know that the Talmudic rabbis harbored similar doubts. “If a man criminally rapes a woman,” they ask, “Would it not be fair for God to prevent her from conceiving? If a thief stole kernels of wheat, would it not be fair for God to prevent them from sprouting? However,” the rabbis conclude, *עולם כמנהגו נוהג* – the world pursues its natural course.”¹ For these Rabbis, God does not intervene to tie up all of life's loose ends. Their view was more nuanced and open to life's ambiguity.

What, then, might be an appropriate view of God for our time? Even more, why should we care? Why not just care for each other and, if we can, make the world just a kinder? Maybe we ought to chuck the whole “religion thing” and simply focus on our wellbeing and survival – justifying it with patina of something nobler by saying we are fighting for Jewish continuity.

¹ Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 54b

I can only answer for myself, but such a Jewish life – bereft of God, only concerned with our own People or even just doing good because it makes me feel better – seems ... well ... empty. More than this, without God Jewish survival does not really seem to matter all that much. Sure, I want to live on – and want the members of my tribe to survive – but it certainly seems that we ought to be able to make the case for being Jewish on some firmer foundation than just wanting lots of little Jewish grandkids. I can only speak for myself, but life seems to have a whole lot more purpose, its anguish is more bearable, the daily grind more grand and glorious with God than without. The question is: who is this God?

The answer rests in the most basic of Jewish thoughts – the Jewish claim of *אֱלֹהִים יְחִיד* *Adonai echad*, “God is one.” When we say this, what do we mean? The Hebrew word *אֱחָד* offers different possibilities. First, “one” can mean “unity”. Second, it implies a “singularity” or uniqueness. Finally, it can mean “only”, reminding us of the infinite potential – and gift – of every moment.

This morning I would like to work through with you the God I *can* believe in, one that allows for the insights of modernity and the experience of life’s inequities. I don’t know if I can convince you. I just hope you will think about it – and maybe use the coming year (or, at least your conversation at the ‘break-fast’ this evening) to discuss the possibility of God – a God for grown-ups, a God for the 21st (or 58th) century.

Echad – Unity

This past January I had the good fortune to spend a few weeks traveling with our son in Laos. One evening we heard chanting across from where we were staying. The sound was coming from hundreds – if not several thousand people – at a temple just across the street. It was the night of the full moon and, it so happened, a Buddhist festival. Everyone was dressed in white. Not unlike the haunting melodies we communally offer today, the participants joined – some more piously, others a bit less enthusiastically – in repetitive chants. It was foreign, yet very familiar. One striking difference, however, was

that every single worshipper was tied to a string that, in turn, was connected to a longer string that floated above. The web of strings was interconnected in a network that tied to the Buddha at the center. In a powerfully visual and physical way, every participant was linked not only to the source of his or her faith, but also to one another.

This interconnection of all is one of the most moving insights of modern science, which postulates that every element in all creation (except for Hydrogen and Helium) was formed inside a star.² After eons, when those stars exploded, they spewed the atoms of all the heavier elements out into the universe. With the passage of more time, those items gathered to make up most of everything we see and all that we are. Every atom in your body and mine, therefore, came from inside a star. Without much exaggeration, then, to see the stars we do not need to look up in the night sky. We need only look at ourselves – living, breathing “stardust.”

What I witnessed in Laos, what modern science postulates – that there is a deeply rooted unity in all creation - is a fundamental teaching of *Kabbalah* (Jewish mysticism). Teachers of *Kabbalah* argue that the world is not random, but is infused with consciousness. Indeed, teaches my study-partner, Rabbi Larry Englander, “one of the mystical names for God is נשמתא דעלמא *nishmata de-alma*, ‘the soul of the world’. If the universe is God’s body, then God is the conscious mind or soul that regulates the flow of energy and information within it.” We are part of something bigger than our selves – and every cell, every molecule, every atom of our very being – affirms the tug of those invisible strings that unites with the God that is “soul of the world.”

If faith is that which connects us to the world and others, “sin” is detachment. The litany of our transgressions and the range of our wrongdoings (deception, manipulation, indifference, self-indulgence) often trace back to the belief that “what I do is my own business”. In truth, however, we are tied to one another – and what we do (or choose to ignore) does impact those beyond our selves.

² <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/space/star-in-you.html>

The God of Judaism binds us together – it is writ in our bones, it was forged when we stood shoulder to shoulder at Sinai, it is the responsibility we have to repair this broken world.

Echad – Aloneness

What are the first words of Torah? Instead of understanding Torah's opening phrase as "In the beginning", Jewish mysticism offers a radical re-reading – "With beginning, 'It' created God." In other words, every aspect of the Divine that we talk about – what we call "God" – emerges from something so intensely unique, singular and solitary that we cannot really comprehend it. The God we perceive – expressed through the world we know – is but an expression or manifestation of this singular Source.

Modern science – through the theory of the Big Bang – also speaks of the universe created from an infinitesimally small point that, in essence, is "nothing." *Kabbalah* speaks of God in similar terms – as אין, "Nothingness." Daniel Matt, professor of Jewish mysticism says, "To call God 'Nothingness' does not mean that God does not exist. Rather, it conveys the idea that God is *no thing*. God animates all things and cannot be contained by them."³

The "alone-ness" of God, and the potential distance we feel from something of such power and uniqueness is reflected in the words we say during these Days of Awe. God is מלכינו, a transcendent "Ruler" who orders things far beyond our understanding. Yet we also say God is אבינו – close to us like a parent. God's singularity is incomprehensible, but the idea of something *being* unique is not. After all, you and I are unique. There is no one like you – never has been and never will be.

In modern science, the whole universe radiates and incorporates its origins. The mystics similarly teach that we all contain "sparks" of the Divine. *Mitzvot*, according to *Kabbalah*, release the special qualities in every person and all

³ Daniel Matt, "Before the Big Bang" *Jewish Review of Books* (Summer 2012), p. 5

creation, and – if it's possible to say this – “Make the One above.”⁴ In short, God is “created” through the connection with others.

During this past year, as our daughter went through major surgery, then rounds of chemo, the one thing we never felt – not for a moment – was alone. Some asked, “Did all this make you question your faith?” I was angry. It hurt. I was scared (I still am, at times). But I never “lost” faith, because I don't have a faith that expects the world to revolve around me. עולם כמנהגו נוהג – the world pursues its natural course.

In fact, over these past months we felt more surrounded by God than ever. Dozens of you shared your own stories – of cancer survived or illness you found the strength to endure. Emails of hope, hugs offered, countless prayers uttered, hats knit to keep her hairless head warm, hands laid in healing love, meals made. Lose faith?! Through cancer, faith was renewed. It was not a faith in a God who magically makes things all better, but a more mature faith – one that sees God as the compassion to take each individual story and touch it to the human condition of life and death, joy and anguish.

One friend, who recently lost her mother, made us a meal. As she handed over the tray of food she said, “I'm just ‘passing the chicken.’”

“Passing the chicken?” I asked.

She explained, “When I was in need, others were there for me. They lovingly prepared something for me. Now I can do it for you. I'm just ‘passing the chicken.’”

My friends, none of us escapes the “dark night of the soul.” But the sacred act of “passing the chicken” teaches that the God who made the universe is in each of us – and our simple acts of compassion can lift those “sparks of Divinity.”

Echad – Only

What time is it? The “right” answer is “who cares, it's Yom Kippur!”

⁴ Zohar 3:113a

The idea of “time” – at least precise time – is relatively recent. True, in Biblical days sundials were being used.⁵ In the Talmudic period rabbis had devised a system of “hours.” The first minute hand on a clock, however, only appeared in 1577. It’s just in the past few decades, however, that we could confidently say it is 12:23 or measure time in nanoseconds.

Even so, my favorite clock is this one that, in place of numbers, has written – multiple times around the rim – the word “now”. It is a reminder of the third implication of the word **אחרי**, for to be “only” means that all we really have is where we are right now.

The basic assumption of our age is that scientific inquiry can answer all our questions. How long have we been here? How did this all begin? What gives us life? What can keep us alive? But science cannot – nor does it purport to even try – to answer everything. John Polkinghorne was a professor of physics and mathematics at Cambridge University until he left to study for the Anglican priesthood. The success of science, he observed, is:

Purchased ... by the modesty of its ambition. It sets out to ask only the question of what are the processes by which things happen, bracketing out of its consideration other questions, such as whether there is meaning, value or purpose present in what is happening.⁶

The Torah says the world was created in six days. It’s not simply that it’s scientifically incredulous. It’s irrelevant. Trying to figure out why the sun, moon and stars don’t show up until day four or how one person could be made out of another is simply asking the wrong thing. It’s making “how the world was created?” – a scientific question – the central issue instead of focusing on the religious question at hand – namely, why were we created? And now that we are here, what is our task? Where are we heading?

The past informs us. It helps define us. And the future inspires (or maybe haunts) us. But all we have is, in truth, the one thing we know, is *now*. Because we don’t know what tomorrow brings (or even if there will be a “tomorrow”), it means this moment – the “only” we have right now – is the doorway to any

⁵ Isaiah 38:8 and II Kings 20:9

⁶ *Science and Religion in Quest of Truth*, chapter 1

number of possible paths. What you and I do today (or chose not to do) can change the future. The "only" God – the one who is not just all of space, but is also the One who calls us to act right now. God does not reward or punish *per se*, but does put before us blessing or curse – and utters a commanding "choose life", offering us to have our days filled with purpose and reason. Yom Kippur, then, is not only about missing the mark with the things we do that harm our selves, others or the world. It is about not seizing the moment – helping create the future we dream might be.

No wonder the Psalmist sang, "*this* is the day that God has made. Let us celebrate and rejoice in it."⁷ No one knows what tomorrow brings. *This* day is what you have. Seek forgiveness - now. Love those you need – now. Live. Now.

A final story about certainty and God. In the movie, "The Frisco Kid," Gene Wilder plays Avram, a young rabbi sent from Poland to San Francisco in 1850. At one point during his journey he's taken captive by Indians. Struggling through a great drought, the tribal chief asks Avram, "Yes or no, can your God make rain?"

"Yes," Avram replies.

"But he doesn't?"

"No." The chief demands to know why not. Avram replies, "He doesn't make rain. He gives us strength when we're suffering. He gives us compassion when all we feel is hatred. He gives us courage when we're searching around blindly like little mice in the darkness ... but He does not make rain!"

Suddenly, there is lightning and a clap of thunder, followed by a torrential downpour. Avram continues, "Of course ... sometimes, just like that, He'll change His mind."

Like Rabbi Avram everything I've said could be completely wrong. But through the uncertainty, questioning and doubt I still think we can come to a sense that life is more than random chance. Faith – and reason – bring me to accept the invisible strings that tie me to all that is. I find meaning in a life that

⁷ Psalm 118:24

may be brief, but is significant, nonetheless. I find God in the love I receive, through the bitter and the sweet. And each moment is, if I am open to it, a gift.

In the end, whether we get the parking spaces we pray for or not, the life we hoped and dreamed for or not, we are part of a Great and Holy Unity. And, as the mystics of our people taught, that singular One calls to us, is made real only when we act.

Imagine that – a world made whole just by "passing the chicken."

*Thanks to Amy Zimmernan Levinson for teaching me
"passing the chicken" and Evan Mallah for the "now" clock.*