

Erev Rosh HaShanah 5783
Rabbi Karen S. Citrin
Reopening Part 1 – God

This past year we witnessed the launch of the world's premier space science observatory. The James Webb Space Telescope made history when it released its first color images in July, giving astronomers and all of us a glimpse into our solar system, thousands of galaxies, and star clusters never seen before. NASA's space telescope has produced the deepest and sharpest infrared image of the earliest galaxy in the universe, as it appeared a mere 4.6 billion years ago. NASA invites us to join Webb in probing (quote) "the mysterious structures and origins of our universe and our place in it."¹ A timely invitation on the eve of a New Year.

We are reminded that there are billions of galaxies in the universe with each galaxy containing billions of stars. We, too, are stardust, as Joni Mitchell sings², privileged to live (God willing) for six or seven or eight or maybe even nine decades. Contemplating this is humbling. Each of us is created *B'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of, and with the spark of, the Divine, a shining star. Our source of existence a mystery. Year in and year out, Rosh Hashanah beckons us to ponder our existence. In the religious imagination, this often involves God.

Yet, we all experience "spiritual icebergs,"³ obstacles that get in the way and sometimes prevent our own spiritual development and direction. This includes our religious baggage, outdated language, imagery or context, our own doubts. What if God – his/her/itself – is one of the biggest spiritual icebergs? Nearly twenty years now as a rabbi, I find that most people, myself included, you as congregants, have hang-ups, doubts and questions about God. It is easier to avoid talking about God. Yet, I believe that questions about our own existence are hard to separate from questions about God. Our High Holy Day *machzor* is a good example. God is everywhere, and I am grateful that our new version (*Mishkan HaNefesh*, CCAR) which we've been using for a few years now invites interpretation, questions, and wrestling with meaning.

If God is a spiritual iceberg, what are we to do about it? How can we approach our own spiritual growth in a healthy and open way? There is a lot of talk these days today about reopening. We are reopening our communities after COVID, coming back together, reconsidering our lives and priorities. This Rosh Hashanah, I am focusing on the idea of reopening. This evening, I invite us to reopen and reimagine images and names of God. Tomorrow morning, I will explore reopening our Jewish community.

The English word God is itself sometimes an obstacle. In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religions, it often connotes a God we humans serve, a big and awesome power. We use human terms to describe God – God knows, acts, loves, judges, gives and takes. The problem is, many of just don't believe this way. We don't believe in a puppet master or a magician, Someone or Something that is all powerful or all good. These images do not reflect the full reality of our lives. These images also tend to be masculine. And let's face it, in today's less binary world, with two women on your *bima*, it is limiting to envision God as an old man on high.

¹ NASA Website

² "Woodstock"

³ Thank you to Rabbi Dan Shevitz for teaching me this term.

How do we open our minds and our hearts to different images, words, and ideas? This summer Rabbi Zoob gave me a gift of a book, a new book by local Rabbi Toba Spitzer called *God is Here, Reimagining the Divine*.⁴ She is the rabbi at the Reconstructionist congregation Dorshei Tzedek in Newton. While Jews throughout the ages have reimagined divinity and reconstructed belief, I find her suggestions especially relevant for our times.

Gleaning from her writing, I would like to suggest two ways based on my own beliefs that we can open up our thinking about divinity, spirituality, and holiness in our lives. They are: God in nature and God as becoming. I know this second one is more abstract and confusing, don't worry, we will get to that next.

One of the lasting lessons from the past couple of years is the value of getting outdoors. Breathing fresh air has literally saved our lives. Our biblical ancestor Jacob found God under the wondrous expanse of sky. While fleeing his twin brother, Esau, and father Isaac, Jacob comes upon, in Rabbi Toba's words, "a place which seems to be no place, with no distinguishing features other than some rocks." As night approaches, Jacob takes one of the rocks as a pillow and dreams of a ladder extending from the earth to the heavens, with messengers of God ascending and descending. Then, Jacob woke from his dream and exclaimed, God is in this place, and I, I did not know. How awesome is this place."⁵ Jacob sanctifies the place, calling it *Beit-El*, House of God.

In just a few short verses, the Hebrew word for place, *makom*, is repeated six times. As John Lennon and Paul McCartney taught us, "There are places I'll remember, all my life though some have changed. Some forever, not for better, some have gone and some remain."⁶ Special places stay in our memory. *Makom*, in Jewish tradition, later becomes a name for God. For the rabbis, *HaMakom* was a name that conveyed a sense of God's nearness and love, comfort and compassion. Like the sense we hopefully feel when we are in synagogue, or this sanctuary.

But before there were buildings, our ancestors found holiness in their natural surroundings – in rocks, in water, in clouds, in fire. These were and are the core components of life, and they, in Rabbi Toba's words, "make visible what is invisible."

Moses encountered God in a thick cloud and in the flame of fire. For the prophets God was a watered garden, and justice raining down. For the psalmist crying out from the depths of despair, strength was to be found in sheltering rocks, and in the Rock of Ages. As the Hasidic master Menachem Mendel of Kotzk taught, "Where is God?" "Wherever we let God in."

I have personally loved our more recent experiences of praying outdoors at temple on Shabbat and holidays. I feel calm and peace in the beauty of our natural surroundings. The birds add their voices, the trees sing in the breeze, and the sky wraps a comforting blanket around us.

⁴ St. Martin's Essentials, New York, 2022.

⁵ Genesis 28:16-17

⁶ In My Life

Israeli poet, Yehudah Amichai, echoes this sentiment:

“Bird tracks in the sand on the seashore
like the handwriting of someone who jotted down
words, names, numbers and places, so he could remember.
Bird tracks in the sand at night
are still there in the day time
though I’ve never seen the bird that left them.
That’s the way it is with God.”⁷

Amichai captures the illusiveness of fully knowing God. And yet, for Amichai, God is the bird who leaves Divine tracks for us to discover, if we open our eyes and take in the beauty of our natural world. The purpose of Creation is to be a dwelling place for God’s light. The invisible made visible.

Another way that Rabbi Toba suggests to open up our God language is to focus on God as becoming. When I turned 35, Micah threw me a surprise party. With three-year-old twins at home, we weren’t getting out much. On the night of my birthday, we got a babysitter and got dressed up to go out to dinner at a hip bar in San Francisco. As someone who doesn’t like surprises, I made sure to know the plan in advance. I walked in and to my complete and utter shock, slowly took in the familiar faces of family and friends who yelled out, “Surprise!” Not only was I surprised to see them, it also took me several long moments to comprehend that Micah had actually thrown me a surprise 40th birthday! You see, knowing that I don’t like surprises, he decided that it would take me five years to get used to the surprise. It worked. While it was hard for me to adjust my expectations for that night, I was reminded of the sense of continual surprise in a good way as I reached 40.

When Moses asks God what he should say to the Israelites when they ask for God’s name, God’s response in the Torah is mysterious and beautiful. “God said to Moses, ‘*Ehyeh-asher-Ehyeh... Ehyeh* sent me to you.’”⁸ The name offered to Moses can most literally be translated as “I will be that I will be,” or “I am Becoming That I am Becoming.” *Ehyeh* is the first person future tense of the verb *to be* (the Hebrew letters of God’s name *Yud, Hey Vav, Hey*). When Moses first encounters the divine, he is entirely unprepared for the call to liberate the Israelites. He lacks confidence and worries that he doesn’t have all the answers. God tells him that it’s okay. *Ehyeh* will be with him, and he will become what he needs to become.

In this encounter, Rabbi Toba teaches that God is not static and all-knowing. Rather, God is transformation and potential, and therefore, change is godly. Referencing early twentieth century mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, everything that is alive is always in process and is constantly being made anew. For Whitehead, who started out as an atheist, God is the “source of genuine novelty.” God, too, changes, ever evolving along with us. White’s insights inspired a school of thought called *process theology*.⁹ God is the creative process that enables us to grow and change, to discover, and to be open to surprise. Embracing

⁷ From “Gods Come and Go; Prayers Stay Forever.” In *Ten Sheaves*, Rabbi Paul J. Citrin.

⁸ Exodus 3:13-14

⁹ C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*, 2008.

God as Becoming means relinquishing some control. Change happens no matter what. Cultivating a sense of evolving, renewing, and becoming will help us navigate the ever-changing reality of our lives.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Faith is the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” In other words, we need to trust the process of becoming. Jewish prayer affirms this notion daily in the morning blessing *Yotzer Or*, which says, “The Holy One renews the work of Creation each day.” (*siddur*) Each day we are blessed to wake up and see the sun rise, take a new breath, take our first steps out into the world. We continue to become, along with God.

It is my hope as our holidays begin, that we all may be able to enter into this time of prayer and reflection with openness to the spiritual opportunities before us. If the word God doesn’t work for you, try out some new names – Fountain, Rock, Creator, Friend, Guardian, Loving Parent, Gentle Power, Comforting Presence, I will Be what I will Be, I will Become what I will Become. These images speak to me. Judaism embraces at least 70 names for God (*midrash*). Perhaps others will open up relationship with the Divine for you.

As we leave this holy place tonight, I invite us to gaze into the depths of black space studded with stars, the sliver of a new moon, and in the words of NASA, “probe the mysterious structures and origins of our universe and our place in it.” We are not alone in the universe. We are linked through time and space with all who have come before us and all who are yet to come. The ancients prayed to be able to pray. May we each find ways to express the deepest yearnings in our hearts. I leave you with an interpretation of the 51st Psalm:

Adonai s’fatai tiftach

Holy One of Being, open my lips, my heart, my being and prayer to You.

U’fi yagid tehilatecha

That my mouth will find words to declare the glory of your Creation, the wonder of existence you have planted in me.

Anthem: Ochila by Ishay Ribo