

Does God need us?

Introduction

We are always praising and thanking God for all the blessings bestowed upon us. But is it just a one-way street, or does God also need us, mere mortals? What? The Almighty needing little us? What a heretical thought! But not so. This notion is clearly and repeatedly (if timidly) implanted in our tradition, since time immemorial. How can that be?

Hints

- God never says in Tanach: I do this for you alone, not for Me.
- “Covenant” means: You do your part (follow commandments) and I do Mine (bestow benefits and blessings).
- Why does God want us to do “our” part? *Could* imply He derives benefit from it.

The Torah says:

For this mitzvah [commandment; in the singular] that I command you today -- it is not hidden from you and it is not distant. [Deut. 30:11]

The Midrash explains:

What [single] “mitzvah” [does the Torah refer to]? The Rabbis say: It is a difficult concept to state. [It seems inappropriate to say that, when referring to God.] It means: “If you observe the Torah, you have done a mitzvah [here in the sense of “charitable act”] both for you and for Me.” [Deut. R. 8:5]

So God derives benefit from our following the Torah.

In the Yom Kippur liturgy, we say:

Avinu Malkenu 'aseh l'maancha im lo l'maanenu

Our Father, our King, act for Your sake if not for ours.

This implies God has a stake in forgiving us.

Heinrich Heine, the 19th-century German-Jewish writer who converted to Christianity to further his career, was asked on his deathbed whether he thought God will forgive him. He replied: “Of course God will forgive me. That's how He makes a living!” Some truth in comment?

So, in what sense does God need us?

**God needs us because He loves us,
God needs us to increase His power,
God needs us for His very existence, and
God needs us to take over from Him.**

Let us explore these ideas, all rooted in Jewish mysticism: The Zohar contends that God has ten parts (*sephirot*, or emanations), which became disjointed. Our task is to help God become One again. This will usher in the messianic age.

-Strongly controversial issue within Judaism, gnawing at the unity of God.

God needs us because He loves us

It is clear that God loves Israel. But love implies need. (In teenage songs, “I love you” is always followed by “I need you”.)

First, evidence that God loves Israel:

-Torah:

The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be His people, His treasured possession [*am segullah*]. The Lord did not set his love on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. [Deut. 7:6-8]

-Prophets:

The Lord has appeared to me, far away, saying, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have remained true to you. [Jeremiah 31:2]

-Writings:

The love of God lasts for all time. [Ps. 52:3]

Two aspects of this love:

-1-Parental love:

We are God's children:

When Israel was a child, I loved him... I taught Ephraim to walk... But my people are bent on turning away from me... How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I turn you over, O Israel?... My heart is turned inside me, all my compassion is kindled. [Hosea 11:1-8]

-2-Passionate love:

Mekhilta (Midrash) says: The Jews gathered at Mt. Sinai to receive the Torah. Moses, with the people behind him, walked to the top and entered the canopy of the clouds. There God gave him the Ten Commandments. “This teaches that the Divine Presence went forth to meet them like a bridegroom who goes forth to meet the bride.” So God married the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai! Moses was the best man, the clouds were the chuppah, and the Ten Commandments were the ketubah.

-Talmud: After we had already accepted the Torah with the words “*naaseh ve-nishma*” – We will do and we will listen [Ex. 24:7] – God held the mountain above our heads and threatened to dump it on us if we didn’t accept the Torah! [Av. Z. 2b, Shabbat 88a, based on Ex. 19:17] But we had already accepted it! The Maharal [16th-century Prague] explains: The Torah says that when a man forces himself on an unmarried woman, he has to pay a fine, he has to marry her (if she and her father agree), and he may never divorce her [Deut. 22:29]. So God was applying his own law: By forcing Himself on us, he guaranteed that he could never divorce us, that the covenant between us would never be cancelled!

-Song of Songs understood as describing God's love for Israel (erotic)
Behold, you are beautiful, my love; behold, you are beautiful... Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle, that feed among the lilies... You are all beautiful, my love; there is no blemish in you... You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride... how much better is your love than wine!.. [Song of Songs 4:1-10]

-Love implies jealousy. So: “No idolatry”!

In Ten Commandments [and 5 times in Torah]:

I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God. [Ex. 20:5]

In Ezekiel 16, God depicts Himself as Israel's lover, who spurned Him and prostituted itself by worshipping other gods. In Hosea, God depicts Himself as a faithful husband who keeps his covenant with Israel in spite of her prostitution.

So love implies need.

God needs us to increase His power

The Psalmist says:

תְּנוּ עֹז לֵאלֹהִים

T'nu 'oz l'Elokim -- Give strength to God. [Ps. 68:35]

The Midrash adds:

R. Azariah said in the name of R. Yehudah b. R. Simone: When Israel perform the will of the Omnipresent they add strength to the heavenly power; as it is said [in Psalms], "To God we render strength" [Ps. 60:14]. When, however, Israel does not perform the will of the Omnipresent, they weaken, if it is possible to say so, the great power of Him Who is above; as it is written [in the Torah], "You weakened the Rock that begot you." [Deut. 32:18].
[Lamentations Rabbah 1:33]

The Psalmist says:

Ve-atta kadosh, yoshev tehillot Yisrael.

And You are the Holy One, enthroned upon the praises of Israel. [Ps. 22:4]

This implies that without the praises of Israel to sustain Him, God is not enthroned.

The Midrash makes it crystal clear:

It is written [in Psalms], "Your throne is established of old." [Ps. 93:2].

R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Abbahu: Although "You are... everlasting" [Ps. 93:2], Your throne was not firmly established, nor were You known in Your world, until Your children [Moses and the people of Israel] recited the Song: [He is my God, and I will praise him; my father's God, and I will exalt him.] [Exodus 15:1-2]

This is what the Israelites said: In truth, You existed both before and after You had created Your world, but You were standing, as it were... Since... we recited the Song before You, only then did Your kingdom and throne become firmly established [and you could sit!] [Exodus Rabbah 23:1]

Hassidism reinforced the notion of God and man being partners in creation. 18th-century Hassidic Rabbi Jacob Joseph of Polonne said that the performance of mitzvot is essential in the divine plan. His 19th-century follower Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk said: "Why was man created? To perfect his soul? No. To lift up the heavens!"

God needs us for His very existence

Sifre Devarim, early Midrash from Talmudic days, says clearly: God is in need of us human beings. When we keep our part of the covenant, we not only affirm God's existence, we **allow** God's existence.

Rabbi Shim'on bar Yochai [the Rashbi, 1st-century mystic, possible author of Zohar] taught:

-It is written [in Exodus]: "This is my God and I will glorify Him" [Ex. 15:2]. This means: "When I acknowledge Him, He is glorified, but when I do not acknowledge Him, He is glorified only in name."

-It is written [in Deuteronomy]: "Because I proclaim the name of the Lord, [ascribe greatness to our God]." [Deut. 32:3] [This means,] when I call His name, He is great, but when I don't... [it is as if He is not great].

-It is written [in Isaiah], "You are my witnesses, said the Lord... and I am God" [Isaiah 43:10]. This means: "When you are My witnesses, I am God, but when you are not My witnesses, it is as if I am not God."

-It is written [in Psalms], "Unto You I lift up my eyes, O You, my enthroned One in the heavens" [Ps. 123:1]. This means: "If it weren't for me, it is as if You would not be sitting in the heavens." [Sifre Devarim 34:6; Pesikta de Rav Kahane 12:6]

Thus, Bar Yochai seems to be saying that, if we do not bear witness to God, God vanishes into unreality. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel calls that passage "one of the most powerful statements found in rabbinic literature". Heschel championed the view that God is in need of man [God in Search of Man; Man is not Alone], along with Israeli rabbi Pinchas Peli.

When we say the Shema, we call on Israel to witness God:

Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokenu Hashem Echad.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

When we write the Shema, two letters must be larger than the rest: The 'ayin of Shema and the dalet of Echad. Together they make up the word 'Ed, meaning witness.

The Yiddish poet Jacob Glatstein wrote:

Without Jews there is no Jewish God.

If we leave this world,

The light will go out in Your tent.

Since Abraham knew You in a cloud,

You have burned in every Jewish face,

You have glowed in every Jewish eye,

And we made You in our image.

["Without Jews"; trans. Nathan Halper, A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969]

I am a physicist, and modern physics has been making very similar statements in the past hundred years or so. Theories such as quantum mechanics and relativity tell us that the observer is of primary importance in determining reality. These are the most successful theories ever devised in terms of how well they predict the behavior of nature, so we can't dismiss

them out of hand. Well, quantum mechanics tells us that before something is observed, there are only nebulous possibilities out there, each with its own probability of being realized. By the act of observation, human beings bring one of these possibilities into existence, and all other possibilities vanish into nothingness. Does witnessing bring God into reality? Could alternative witnessing bring less attractive divine possibilities into reality? Our tradition seems to be saying: There is a synergy between human beings and God.

God needs for us to take over

Is God grooming us to “take over” from Him? The Midrash describes an evolution in God's relationship with Israel, wherein God is more and more dependent on Israel:

-[Rabbi El'azar, the son of Rabbi Yosei said:] The Holy One, blessed be He, first addressed Israel as “daughter” [then “sister”, then “mother”].

-[As “daughter”,] as it says [in the Book of Psalms]:

Hearken, O daughter, consider and incline your ear... [Ps. 45:11].

-When He loved Israel more, He called them “My sister”, as it says [in the Song of Songs],

Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled; for my head is filled with dew, my locks with the drops of the night. [Song of Songs 5:2].

-And when He loved Israel even more, He called them “mother”, for it says [in Isaiah],

Listen to Me, My people; and give ear to Me, O My mother... [Isaiah 51:4]

-Thereupon Rabbi Shim'on bar Yohai arose and kissed [Rabbi El'azar] on his forehead [saying]... “If this had been the only thing I learned in life, I would have been satisfied.” [Exodus Rabbah 52:5]

The Hassidic masters said that the Midrash refers to the progression of God's relationship to Israel, as represented by the three pilgrimage festivals:

-On Pessah, God saves us, helps us and provides for us. We do nothing. We are God's “daughter”.

-On Shavuot, we get the Torah and enter into a partnership with God. Each side has obligations to fulfill, towards the goal of repairing the world. We are God's “sister”, almost His peer, as it were.

-On Sukkot, God seems to disengage, lets us run the show and provide our own interpretations of His Torah. We are God's “mother”.

Modern Hassidic Rabbi YY Jacobson writes:

The message here is too daring to be spoken clearly. Yet the Jewish mystics picked up on it and articulated it... We became, as it were, mentors to [God], showing Him how darkness can be transformed into light, how imperfection is the beginning of deeper perfection, and how destruction is the commencement of renovation. And this is the message of the third holiday, the festival of Sukkot, when we celebrate the renewed relationship between God and Israel forged on Yom Kippur following their estrangement. From sister we turn into mother. From partners with God, we became teachers to God... Yet here is the catch: To become a healthy mother, you first need to be a daughter and a sister.
[<http://theyeshiva.net/Article/View/12/Do-You-Know-How-To-Be-a-Mother>]

Indeed, the Talmud declares that only living rabbis can interpret the Torah. In a famous episode where the rabbis disagree on a point of law, they hear God's voice siding with one of the rabbis. But then they reject God's point of view, saying that THEY, and not God, have the task of interpreting the Torah. The Talmud records that, at that time:

God laughed and declared, "My children have bested me! My children have bested me!" [Bava Metziah 59b]

Evidently, God approved of this "take-over" attitude!

Conclusion

-Our tradition includes many hints that God needs us because He loves us, God needs us to increase His power, God needs us for His very existence, and God needs us to take over from Him.

-Some would say this is heretical. Others that it motivates us to increase our observance.

Rav Nachman of Breslov: The day that you were born is the day God decided the world could not continue without you.

Shabbat shalom.