

Considering God in the High Holy Days Sept. 2019
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Hi – I'm grateful to have been asked to speak as a member of the Considering God salon, my spiritual home within Or Shalom. One of the many things that make Or Shalom special is the respectful place held for people like me who "don't believe in God." And even invites me to speak from the bima! The Considering God Salon is a place where people who don't have a conventional faith in God talk from the heart about their spirituality and the meaning they find in their lives as Jews. There is research that shows up to half of all American Jews doubt God's existence. It's part of Jewish tradition to "wrestle w/ God" and question what is God. In the Considering God salon those of us for whom a belief in God is not the underpinning of our morality or our Judaism, meet and wrestle with these issues and help each other deepen and clarify our beliefs.

Over the last 7 years, meeting quarterly, we've discussed, for example:

- what **is** spirituality? and shared our spiritual beliefs
- we've asked "what are we doing when we pray at services, since we're not praying to God"
- we've written non-theistic prayers, some of which were shared last year
- most of this year we've been discussing the evolution of the role of women in Judaism, how to challenge the patriarchy in Judaism

Meaningful questions and thoughtful discussions that affected us positively. I think we've all gotten a better understanding of people who **do** believe in a deity, and have more tolerance for the variety of beliefs that actually exist among people of different religions and within the same religion. I think somehow our discussions frees people from having to hold a defensive posture-- of not believing in an interventionist god that answers prayers, and helps us to just relax into the comfort and power of familiar rituals done among people we trust. Several members have adopted daily traditional Jewish prayer rituals they thought they'd never do, and we'll hear from one such person at a later service. Others have deepened their non-theist beliefs.

I fall into that category, and I was asked to share my particular history. In my personal case, I believe I was always an atheist. My father was really into Greek mythology and read myths to me and my sisters as bedtime stories, along w/ fairy tales and Russian folk tales. In Sunday school the Jewish bible stories were in a softcover book that now maybe we'd call a graphic novel, seemed like a big fat comic book to me. It did show God as an old white-bearded man in the clouds, often angry, the stern all-powerful father, much resembling Zeus and Thor. And so I understood that these were the creation myths and tales of my people, the Jewish people, Jewish folk tales and history. I actually didn't realize until about 4th grade that anyone took the God parts of the story as literally factual, as anything other than stories and like Aesop's Fables, morality tales that showed righteous and wise ways to live.

Growing up, being an atheist didn't seem to interfere w/ being a good Jew. In school I really got into Biology, was a Bio major in college, and evolution and neuropsychology become my way of understanding the world.

So at Sabbath services when we face the door to welcome the queen of the Sabbath, I don't think any of us are expecting to see a being or even a spirit walk in the door (though I could be wrong) but I do think we all benefit from that **visualization** of the arrival of peace and rest and comfort, we benefit mentally, emotionally, hormonally.

I, like so many agnostic and atheistic Jews, enjoy and am uplifted by Jewish ritual, the cadence of the prayers, the music, the meditations, the compassionate values, the wise ethics. I love the *alternative* readings in our prayer books. I can connect with a spiritual sacredness, without believing in a God almighty. I find that the patriarchal God language of the King of the Universe, interferes with rather than helps my spirit soar. I think this shorthand code word - God - which stands for so many different things to different people, is outmoded and that we need today, in our current understanding of the world, to speak in clearer terms. I believe, as do many others, that human beings as a people would benefit from taking responsibility for the state of the world, not rely on a God to "fix" things, to make miracles or to blame for disasters. I believe we all benefit from connecting to the higher power within ourselves, evolving from monotheism to monism - a concept I first heard about in Or Shalom and that the Considering God salon is taking up to study and discuss next. I believe that this spirit within each of us that is connected to everything is the unified ONE we speak to in the Sh'ma,

I was struck at a recent Sabbath service discourse on the Sh'ma, of how Jews don't have a name for God, how in the story of Moses and the Burning Bush, when Moses asks what name to tell the Israelites, he is given no name to pronounce, just "I am" or "I am who I am", so we use Yahweh or Adonai or other name substitutes. It so reminded me of the Tao Te Ching which says "The name you can say isn't the real name". Taoist texts speak of the "Mysterious energy of the universe which is the source of life" and originally had no gods. Like the Israelites, people wanted gods to pray to, and so gods were created. The scholar Reza Aslan believes people have a need to create a god with a human image – someone like us, but way greater. I wonder if Judaism started with just the "I am", but people demanded a more humanoid god. Maybe we can evolve from that need back to the original "I am" spark within us all. Maybe we can return to engage directly with that transformative spark that unites us, in song, in embodied spirituality, in chants at rallies, in the prayers of the heart. In the words of one prayer, "this is our power, there is nothing else." I find that enough. Thank you. L'Shanah tovah.