In the 1986 animated film An American Tail, Fievel Mousekewitz, a Jewish kid/mouse and his family flee cat pogroms in Russia. As their ship approaches Ellis Island, Fievel is washed overboard, but he survives and makes it to New York. As he navigates the city searching for his family, he meets Henri, the Pigeon, who is helping to construct the Statue of Liberty. Henri teaches him not to give up hope, and "Never Say Never." At the very end of the film, after Fievel has helped save the mice of New York from wicked cats and been reunited with his family, Henri and his friends take the Mousekewitzes to see the newly completed statue. As they fly around the statue's head, she *winks* at them.

In 1989's Ghostbusters 2, the heroes investigate a "mood slime" that has infiltrated the New York City sewers. It's behaving malevolently because, well, it's been absorbing all the negative emotional energy of New York City. But in the lab, it joyfully dances to Jackie Wilson music.

At the thrilling conclusion of the movie, the Ghostbusters need to counteract the negative energy and bring goodwill to New Yorkers. They need "[s]omething that everyone in this town can get behind…a symbol. Something that appeals to the best in each and every one of us. Something good. Something decent. Something pure." That symbol is, of course, Lady Liberty. By spraying the Statue with the mood slime and blasting the good vibes of "(Your Love Keeps Lifting Me) Higher and Higher," they are able to animate the Statue through Manhattan, encouraging spectators to cheer and sing along to help save the day.

As a Jewish kid growing up in Brooklyn Heights in the late 80s, taking in this media, it all felt very familiar to me. I saw the Statue of Liberty every day from my neighborhood playground –incredibly close by, yet too far away to reach. I internalized the ideals of freedom, cooperation, justice, hope, and possibility represented by the Statue. My parents love to remind me that when I was young, I thought that God *lived* in the Statue of Liberty.

You might be feeling a little uncomfortable sitting here on Rosh Hashanah listening to a rabbi talk about imagining God's presence in a statue – after all, a significant percentage of our textual tradition is about the evils of idol worship! Let me state for the record that I've never directed prayers to the Statue of Liberty. Even as a child, I didn't think that God *was* the Statue of Liberty. I thought that God *lived* there.

Symbolic imagery can be a powerful guide on our spiritual journeys. This idea is *not* antithetical to, or even a divergence from, Jewish practice. Think about the imagery used to describe God in our traditional texts and liturgy. In Mi Chamocha, we call God "*Tzur Yisrael…*"[1]: "Rock of Israel." In the Amidah, we call God "*tzuri v'goali…*"[2]: "my Rock and my redeemer." In Psalm 23, we say "*Adonai ro'i, lo echsar…*[3]": "The Eternal is my Shepherd, I shall never be in need." In Unetanah Tokef, we sing "*Kevakarat ro'eh edro ma'avir*

[1] Mi Chamocha (*Kol HaNeshamah* machzor p. 318)
[2] Amidah closing meditation (KH p. 382)
[3] Psalm 23 (KH p. 1034)

tzono tachat shivto, ken ta'avir…"[4]: "[J]ust as a shepherd numbers the flock, passing the herd by the staff, so do you make us pass before you." And those are just two of many metaphors for God in our tradition.

In her new book, God is Here: Reimagining the Divine[5], Rabbi Toba Spitzer identifies what she sees as the problem most people have with God. She begins by explaining the three categories of metaphor described by writer James Geary in his book, *I Is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*: Active, Dormant, and Extinct.[6]

Active metaphors are ones that *stop you in your tracks*; the ones you might have trouble *wrapping your head around*. You have to *unpack* them to understand them, and their novelty makes you *reflect* on the *layers* of meaning. These metaphors are the linguistic equivalent of an *earworm* – a *catchy* song that you *can't get out of your head*. If the metaphor is being used as a *vehicle* for a bigger idea, it might *live in your head rent-free*.

Dormant metaphors are metaphors that have become *absorbed* into the language – common enough to *border* on cliché, but still recognizable as metaphors, like an *elephant in the room*. Though these idioms may be *dizzying* to non-native speakers or *all Greek* to children,

[4] Unetanah Tokef (KH p. 350)
[5] which grew out of a Rosh Hashanah sermon.
[6] Yes, like a volcano.

most people are able to *draw out* the meaning from context clues, *get their ducks in a row*, and *see the writing on the wall*.

Extinct metaphors, on the other hand, have become so *deeply entrenched* in our language that we've forgotten that they're *figures of speech*. The original meaning has *gotten so far away from us* that we take them *literally*. It's the *natural evolution* of language, and *losing sight* of that is no reason to feel like a *laughingstock*. I'm going to give you a second to *catch your breath* and *let that all sink in*. Do you *see what I mean*? *Bullseye*.

As Rabbi Spitzer explains,

> "What is most powerful about "extinct" metaphors is that they're not really extinct at all. Quite the opposite - we take them so for granted that we think they're describing reality as it is…for many, many people, God has become an "extinct" metaphor. Regardless of what we say we believe or don't believe, when most of us say the word *God*, what we're referring to is actually a metaphor: GOD IS A BIG POWERFUL PERSON. What we then profess to believe or disbelieve is that metaphor."[7]

Today is *Rosh Hashanah*, literally, "the head of the year," and earlier this morning, Cantor Kate sang *Avinu Malkeinu* – literally, "Our Father, Our King." The word *Melech* is probably the most commonly occurring descriptor for God in our traditional liturgy, owing to its presence in the formula for most blessings. For our ancestors living under monarchal rule, there was probably great comfort in the image

[7] Spitzer, Toba; God is Here, pp. 21-22

of "*Melech Ha'olam*" (King of the Universe) or "*Melech Mal'chei HaM'lachim*" ("the King of the King of Kings") – bigger and more powerful than kings of flesh and blood, capable of acts of salvation and redemption – the Ruler who is ultimately in control, no matter what kind of oppressive human leader may be in charge at the moment.

If you believe in a God that acts in human history – a God who intervenes in worldly affairs – this imagery could be quite moving for you.

But if the idea of monarchy isn't particularly appealing, or if you don't connect with the image of "*HaMelech yoshev al kisei ram v'nisa*",[8] ("The King sitting on his lofty and exalted throne") the prayer service might leave you unsatisfied.

Without new perspectives for exploring the traditional language, some may grow disillusioned with Jewish tradition and spirituality. If you've been taught that there's only one right way to be Jewish – only one right way to think about God – you might choose another path entirely: think about how many well-known American Buddhists, Hare Krishnas, Unitarian Universalists, humanists and atheists were raised Jewish in the 1940s and 50s. Stephen Levine, Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Joseph Goldstein, Ram Dass, Jon Kabat-Zinn, Allen Ginsberg…

[8] HaMelech (KH p. 270)

To be clear, I have no ill will towards anybody who has found meaning and purpose outside of Jewish tradition. But as a Jewish leader, I'm disappointed that their Jewish institutions didn't make space for them and invite them to find that connection within our tradition.

Growing up, I enjoyed attending services with my family, but the liturgical language I had access to left me feeling little spiritual connection to the prayers. My sense of spirituality and holiness in the world, which developed in parallel with my connection to Jewish tradition and community rather than in relation, was deeply tied to nature and stillness – two things in short supply in my everyday life as a kid growing up in the suburbs of New York City.[9]

As a teenager, I learned about the Quaker concept of "the inner light," the idea that each person has within them a spark of divinity, and that each of us has the ability and the responsibility to access that spark of divinity within us for the purpose of bringing greater understanding and peace to the world. I was a young adult before I learned how similar this imagery is to the Lurianic kabbalistic concepts of *k'lippot* and *tikkun olam*, which I spoke about in my Rosh Hashanah sermon a few years ago.[10]

[9] As I've mentioned before, I spent parts of my childhood summers in the Poconos, at a summer camp run by a Quaker family on their working farm. Each day of camp, we would meet at a different spot around camp and spend a few minutes sitting in silence before moving on to discuss our next activities. On Sundays, we'd go out into the wooded area further out on the property and spend an hour sitting on logs, taking in our environment and community. Although the camp wasn't overtly religious, to me it hummed with spiritual energy. I actually wrote much of this sermon in those woods – sitting by the babbling creek, occasionally looking up to watch a brilliantly blue dragonfly fly around me and, on one occasion, landing on my fingertip while I was writing.

[10] See my sermon from Rosh Hashanah 5780

Both of these ideas are also in resonance with the theology of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, the intellectual founder of Reconstructionist thought. Kaplan rejected the idea of a personal God, writing in his book, The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion, "We cannot conceive of God any more as a sort of invisible superman, displaying the same psychological traits as man, but on a greater scale. We cannot think of him as loving, pitying, rewarding, punishing, etc."[11]

In place of an anthropomorphic God, Kaplan suggested multiple models for thinking about God as a power in the universe – a power for goodness that could be utilized by people. Kaplan describes several aspects of divinity in his book: the Power that makes for Cooperation; for Freedom; for Social Regeneration; for Salvation.

Kaplan's theology was often misunderstood, and highly controversial (one Orthodox critic disparagingly described Reconstructionist theology as "there is no God, and Kaplan is His prophet").[12] However, Kaplan was, to the frustration of the atheists and humanists who sought his support, a believer, though the God in which he believed looked very different than a traditional conception.

In his diaries, Kaplan wrote of being approached by rabbinical students at Jewish Theological Seminary, the institution where he spent most of his professional life teaching. These students felt that Kaplan's

[11] Kaplan, Mordecai M., The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion; The Jewish Reconstructionist Foundation, 1947; p. 88.
[12] Scult, Mel, Judaism Faces the Twentieth Century: A Biography of Mordecai M. Kaplan; Wayne State University Press, 1994; pp. 342-343

continued use of the word God undermined his theology and served to uphold the anthropomorphic imagery he rejected.[13] Kaplan described his response thusly:

> In answer to the argument that some of the most worthwhile people are alienated from Jewish life and ethical endeavor along Jewish lines because we insist upon using the name of God I replied, first, *they are alienated because we do not engage frankly in the task of putting new content into the term God*, and secondly *it is not the use of the term God that repels them but rather the whole nexus of legends which most of our people insist upon teaching as factual and historical*.[14]

In other words, it's not the word "God" that's the problem: it's the unsustainable ideas, baggage, and assumptions that have been assigned to it over the years.

Part of the reason we struggle to talk about God without falling into anthropomorphic language is simply because Hebrew is a gendered language (and binary-gendered, at that) – every noun – everything that has a name – is categorized using either the male or female grammatical form. Sometimes, it can seem arbitrary: *Shulchan*, meaning "table," and *kisa*, meaning chair, are masculine, but they both take the feminine plural suffix. Most animals are grammatically masculine; most places are grammatically feminine. *Siddur* and *machzor* are grammatically masculine, but *Torah* is grammatically feminine. If you refer to this ritual garment in the plural form, you might use the Yiddish *talesim*, which uses a masculine plural form, but

[13] They did have a point – look at the quote I just shared, referring to God with the personal pronoun "him."

[14] Kaplan diaries, January 29, 1935, JTS, box 2, vol. 7, as cited in Scult, Mel. The Radical American Judaism of Mordecai M. Kaplan; Indiana University Press, 2014; p. 113.

the Hebrew word *tallit* is feminine, and the proper Hebrew plural form is likewise feminine: *tallitot*.

In Hebrew, God is referred to using masculine pronouns. Hence, the traditional language used when talking about God is masculine. As you might imagine, there is some disagreement about how significant that is. For traditionalists, regardless of how arbitrary it may seem, it's tradition. Our ancestors, whether or not they actually conceived of God as male, used masculine language; therefore, we should use the same traditional language.

But it's undeniable that the use of a gendered pronoun has influenced our view of God. The idea of referring to God using masculine pronouns is so deeply ingrained that it can feel radical and uncomfortable to use other pronouns. Think about that great one-hit-wonder from the 90s, "Counting Blue Cars," by Dishwalla. If it's not ringing a bell, the chorus goes, "Tell me all your thoughts on God – 'cause I'd really like to meet her, and ask her why we're who we are…" Hearing it as a kid, it seemed transgressive, in spite of the fact that, as we've established, my childhood image of God was feminine. And for some people, it was unforgivably transgressive: J.R. Richards, the lead singer and songwriter of Dishwalla, has even said that he received death threats for writing the song.[15]

[15]"We always refer to God as a male, so why not make it a female? I started creating imagery to describe this journey…It quickly came together – I didn't think too much about it. But it did end up being one of the songs that really affected people both positively and negatively. I never thought I'd ever have a song I'd get death threats for writing." https://www.songfacts.com/blog/interviews/dishwalla-founding-frontman-jr-richards

Of course, we Reconstructionists, alongside fellow progressive Jewish movements, have both a healthy regard for tradition *and* a willingness to make the changes necessary to keep God and Judaism alive for contemporary Jews. There have been many attempts to address the gendered nature of Hebrew. For instance, on page 474 in our *machzorim*, the editors offer a variety of options for formulating the opening of blessings. For example, in place of the masculine form "*Baruch Atah*," one could choose to use the feminine "*B'ruchah At*," or even Marcia Falk's suggestion of "*N'varech Et*," which totally omits any personal pronoun for God, framing the blessing instead on the community offering the blessing: "we bless," rather than, "Blessed is…"

Similarly, we have sought new perspectives for thinking about God. In light of contemporary discomfort with language of lordship or kingship, Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, founder of the progressive, feminist, "neo-Hasidic" Jewish Renewal movement, introduced the idea of substituting the word *Ruach*, or Spirit, in place of *Melech* in the opening of blessings – that is, "*Baruch Atah Hashem, Eloheinu Ruach Ha'olam* – Spirit of the Universe." *Ruach* also has the benefit of being one of the few nouns in our tradition that appears in both masculine and feminine forms. It's my family's personal practice, as well as the custom at Camp Havaya, the Reconstructionist movement's summer camp in the Poconos, to use *Ruach*.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow points out that the tetragrammaton – the four-letter proper name of the Israelite god, spelled Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey and

typically vocalized as "*Adonai*," meaning "my Lord," or "*Hashem*," meaning "the name" – is comprised of what some linguists refer to as aspirate consonants: letters which are mostly pronounced through breath, neither fully vowels or consonants. They usually appear in service to other letters as prefixes, suffixes, and often as vowels, filling out the words. They're the in-between letters. As a result, the four letters, when put together in this way, are practically unpronounceable.[16]

Rabbi Waskow writes:

> "It is unpronounceable in my view not because we are forbidden to pronounce it — that understanding is in my view a way of avoiding the deeper truth — but because if one tries to do so, pronouncing these four strange letters…WITHOUT any vowels, one simply breathes…
>
> "The notion of YHWH as "the Breath of Life" accords with a deep sense of God as intimate and transcendent at once. If we have no breath in us, we die. If there is no breath beyond us, we die…
>
> Still more, Breathing encompasses not only all humans but all life-forms. What the trees breathe out is what we breathe in; what we breathe out is what the trees breathe in. So YHWH as a breathing sound evokes "*kol ha'neshama*," all breathing beings, and "*nefesh chaya*," all those in which is the life-breath.[17]

[16] You might have heard attempts to vocalize the name, such as "Jehovah" or "Yahweh"– but both of these are anachronistic, as the ancient Hebrew had no J sound, and while it is possible that the Hebrew letter vav was pronounced more like a W than a V, we have no indications of which vowels (or even whether vowels) were used in saying the name, something which only *kohen hagadol*, the High Priest, was permitted to do, once a year, on Yom Kippur.

[17] Excerpted from "Why YAH/YHWH," by Rabbi Arthur Waskow; https://theshalomcenter.org/content/why-yahyhwh

Rabbi Everett Gendler's commentary in our prayerbook on *Nishmat Kol Chai*, which translates as "let the breath of every living thing praise your name," supports this image:

> *Nefesh, ruach, neshamah*: these three Hebrew terms are often translated as soul or spirit. They were originally terms for breath…Breath is the prerequisite of life and speech, of existence and communication, and it is a gift requiring no conscious attention except in cases of illness. If each inhalation required a direct order, each exhalation a conscious command, how should we find energy or attention for anything else? How should we sleep? In truth, we do not breathe; we are breathed. At this moment of my writing, at this moment of your reading, at succeeding moments of our praying, breath enters and leaves our lungs without our conscious intervention. Truly we are breathed.[18]

But if the name itself is like breath, how can we pronounce it if we don't wish to refer to God as "*Adonai*" or "*Hashem*?" After all, it appears frequently in our tradition. What other options do we have for pronouncing the tetragrammaton in our prayers or textual study?

One centuries-old option from kabbalistic tradition is the name *Havayah*. Spelled Hey-Vav-Yud-Heh, it's an inversion of the four letters – an anagram – and it's also the Hebrew word for being. You may have heard it used as the name of the Reconstructionist summer camp, or in the Nava Tehila song "Shiviti," which Cantor Kate and I sang just before the sermon.

[18] KH p. 264

Rabbi Waskow suggests using an abbreviated form, an ancient name of God that appears frequently in our Psalms: *Yah* (as in *Hallelujah*, which means, "Praise *Yah*!").

I've attended services that he's led, and I can tell you that when he gets to the tetragrammaton, the name Yah emerges from Reb Arthur's throat as a deep, prolonged, breathy rumble. It's quite a memorable experience. A leader in the progressive Jewish Renewal movement, Reb Arthur typically uses feminine God language in the Hebrew, so that the blessing before the Torah reading begins, "*B'ruchah At Yah, Elohateinu, Ruach Ha'Olam, Asher Kervat'nu La'avodatech…*"

Now imagine you're up there sharing an *aliyah* with him, trying to reconcile that version with the Torah blessing you're already struggling to remember from your *b mitzvah*.

And that leads me to what I believe, in all honesty, is the biggest reason that these changes haven't taken a greater hold. In my view, it has less to do with fealty to tradition and more to do with the challenge of acclimating to something new, particularly if you, like many Jews, don't know or understand Hebrew. It's not that you don't care – it's that it's very challenging to internally edit something that you can recite from memory.[19]

[19] It's not even just about the Hebrew! Comedian John Mulaney has a bit about visiting his parents and joining them for Mass on Christmas Eve. Having previously assured them that he had been attending church, he was caught out in his lie when he responded to the priest's "Peace be with you" with "And also with you" and not the updated response, "And also with your spirit."

I feel for you – I, too, first learned the prayers in Hebrew through repetition. I, too, learned to chant Torah by memorizing from a recording. I still chant *V'ahavta* the way that I learned it as a kid, in spite of the fact that I learned it using a different trope system than the one I use today when I chant Torah. It's practically muscle memory. Is it really fair for me to expect you to just Ctrl-F "find and replace" your baked-in conceptions of God with a new one that has greater fidelity and relevance to your life? To relearn something that was already challenging to learn?

The short answer is "no." I'm not telling you that you must change – I'm simply extending an invitation to think about it. To imagine what it might be like to stretch your theological and liturgical muscles and try something new. It's always worth reflecting and revisiting the things that you think that you know about yourself. People change. Tastes change.

You may know that in the 1990s, a Dutch scientist identified the chemical compounds in Brussels sprouts that made them bitter, and as a result, companies have been able to breed a less-bitter Brussels sprout.[20] Brussels sprouts actually do taste better than they did 40 years ago. Even if you didn't like Brussels sprouts as a kid, it might be worth giving them a second chance.

Of course, you're also free not to.

[20] https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2019/10/30/773457637/from-culinary-dud-to-stud-how-dutch-plant-breeders-built-our-brussels-sprouts-bo

Former President George H.W. Bush famously had an aversion to broccoli. Whether there was something about the bitterness of the vegetable, or the way it was prepared, he didn't even want to be around it. As his wife, Barbara said, "he ate it until he was 60." Regardless, it was a big topic of conversation during his reelection campaign. The president of the United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association delivered 10 tons of broccoli to the White House. Campbell Soup and Woman's Day magazine organized a recipe contest called, "How to Get President Bush to Eat Broccoli."[21]

Here's the thing: it doesn't matter whether broccoli has health benefits, or that there are many different cooking methods and recipes out there – President Bush was a grown adult, and was free to make his own choices about his body. People, including children, are allowed to not like things, and it's out of line for us to try to convince them to enjoy it.

Listen: I *love* broccoli. I always have. I wish my kids loved it as much as I do. But I can't transmit that love to my children by osmosis or by demanding they eat it, and it would be emotionally and developmentally damaging to try. Likewise, we're not going to cultivate healthy spirituality in people by force-feeding them the image of God that we think they *should* want.

[21] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_H._W._Bush_broccoli_comments

What we *can* do is to encourage new ways of meeting their needs. And we have to offer a broader variety of options.[22] But to be able to offer those options, we must ourselves be aware of what they are.

In her book, Rabbi Toba Spitzer writes:

> Many years ago, I worked in an ice cream store…On any given day, we had over twenty flavors of ice cream available, and we were always experimenting with new ones. One day, a father and his young son came into the store. The little boy - not yet able to read - asked his dad, "What flavors are there?" The father looked up at our wonderful list of flavors of the day, and answered, "There's chocolate, vanilla, and strawberry."
>
> While I sympathized with a dad trying to not overwhelm his child with too many choices, I felt so sad for that little boy. Here was a diverse world of marvelous ice cream flavors, hidden from him only because he couldn't read! It's how I feel about most people's experience of God metaphors. If our only flavor choices are "God is a Distant Ruler," or "God is an All-Powerful and Perfect Being That We Can't Really Understand," I'd probably walk out of the store. But the happy reality is that our religious traditions offer the equivalent of Baskin-Robbins' thirty-one flavors when it comes to metaphors for God, and nothing is stopping us from discovering new metaphors that are relevant, powerful, and meaningful to our lives today.
>
> The important thing to remember is that metaphors don't *define* what something is. A metaphor gives us access to an experience, a way to think about it, talk about it, and act on it…When it comes to God, the metaphors we use are extremely important, because those metaphors will shape our experience in profound ways, and will affect how we engage with the world around us.[23]

So much of our understanding of God is based on things we were told about God by people who, despite their great confidence, didn't

[22] The nutritional benefits of broccoli can also be found in various fruits and nuts – you don't *have* to eat broccoli to get your vitamin K or manganese.
[23] Ibid., pp. 31-33

actually know any more about God than us. None of us, not even those of us who are clergy, can tell you with certainty about who God is or what God does. We can only tell you what our tradition and commentators say. Your understanding of God is yours alone, and you have every right to define God on your own terms. And you also have the opportunity and the responsibility to keep thinking about it – and to be open to change.

If this is a journey you're interested in exploring, the good news is that there are many avenues you can take. There are fantastic books, like Rabbi Spitzer's, and podcasts on the subject. And I want to be sure that you know that you can always reach out to me to find time for a conversation on the subject.

This autumn and winter, I'll be leading a group conversation about developing new perspectives on God, based on Rabbi Spitzer's book, among other sources.

Whether you imagine God as a spirit, an energy, as breath, or even as a national landmark, I invite you to reflect on whether that image is working for you. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't. Maybe it's a moot point because you're not interested in developing a relationship with God right now. Again, you don't have to – but I implore you to take the invitation seriously. Especially during these Days of Awe, it's worthwhile to reflect and be open to new possibilities and understandings of yourself, the world, and the Source of Awe.
Shanah tovah u'm'tukah.