

God Revisited

O.M.G.

I don't think you need to be a millennial to know what the most popular texting acronym in the 21st century means. Let me hear you all say it together: Oh My God.

While I've yet to write OMG in my texts, I have caught myself saying "Oh My God!" in frustration on the pickleball court many times. And, ironically, every now and then I shout Jesus' name when I'm really mad at myself. Typical clergy curse words, I guess.

Each summer as I begin to prepare for the High Holy Day season, one of the first things I do is look at all of the sermons I have delivered over the years. What have I not yet spoken about? What have I spoken about that might need a fresh new take? Ten years ago I wrote a sermon on God. It's been a whole decade since I devoted this time to having a conversation with my beloved community about the star of the High Holy Day season. We recite God's name throughout the services almost as often as we breath. I think the time is ripe to re-visit God.

In the last major Pew¹ survey on American Jewry in 2020, we learned that while three quarters of all U.S. Jews believe in God or some higher spiritual force, this number is not consistent amongst the various denominations.

93% of Orthodox Jews report that they believe in the God of the Bible, compared with 37% of Conservative Jews, 18% of Reform Jews and 12% of Jews with no denominational affiliation.

When it comes to belief in another spiritual power, 6% identify as Orthodox, compared to 50% Conservative and 56% Reform. In other words, the majority of non-Orthodox Jews believe in something greater than

¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/05/11/jewish-identity-and-belief/>

themselves, just not the God who is portrayed in the Torah. My guess is that most of us sitting here right now join this second group.

As I begin my private weekly sessions with b'nei mitzvah students to help them write their *divrei torah*, I ask them to first write several responses to various prompts. One of them focuses on God.

What is your concept of God?

Describe your relationship with God whether you have one or not.

Almost every single time the students write that they either don't believe in God since they "follow science" or that they're not sure. Very few of the students ever talking about God with their families. When I press them on what God they don't believe in, a lot of the time I get the canned image of the man with a white beard in the sky controlling everything down below. I find this unsettling as we never teach this depiction of God in any Keshet class, ever. When I probe a little more, I discover that the Pew study is spot on. The students don't or can't believe in the God depicted in the Torah, one who verbally communicates with people and displays incredible miracles. Most of the time, however, they do express a belief in a power greater than them or even nature itself, that is unknowable, yet real. Some students have described a force beyond gravity, time, and space. Now we're getting somewhere. I'm curious how you would answer these prompts.

Other things we learn from the Pew study show that women are more likely than men to believe in God and those with college, graduate, and post-graduate degrees are similar in their beliefs to Reform Jews. Not surprisingly, our Christian friends fall more in line with Orthodox Jews. I find all of this so interesting.

When I teach a session on God as part of my Judaism 201 course, I try to convey that there is actually no consensus about what God is, regardless of who you ask. The one constant amongst all Jews might simply be that there is a one-ness to God, but beyond that, it's all up for debate. God, in the Jewish sense is actually a tough concept for Jews to get behind. Think about it:

God's name in Judaism is unpronounceable. Although we know the letters to God's name are *yud-hey-vav-hey*, we actually have no clue how to say it aloud. Our friends have settled on Yahweh, Jehovah, or Jah, but any rabbi throughout the ages will tell you these aren't accurate. When Moses asks God's name in the book of Exodus, God gives him one of the most perplexing answers, saying "I am that I am," or "I will be what I will be."

We also learn that God has no image. There is a nothingness to God like the air we breath. It's here and everywhere, but you can't see it. This is one of the reasons Jewish sacred spaces have no pictures, lest someone think it's a depiction of God.

Lastly, contrary to the text of the Torah but according to the mystical tradition, God never even spoke to us. All God ever vocalized was the silent letter *aleph* during the revelation at Sinai. The only sound we heard was the sound of breath. In essence, there's nothing to grasp onto. We can't see or hear God and even say God's name. No wonder so many Jews can't articulate much about God.

What we do have are metaphors. These figures of speech are really the only way to understand God. We find these scattered throughout Jewish liturgy and texts. Our High Holy Day prayer book is filled with them: king, rock, wind, spirit, creator, bringer of peace, shepherd, parent, lover, and the list goes on. Whatever we say about God is an act in poetic language and metaphor since we are not capable of comprehending this awesome oneness that is beyond definition.

Perhaps the reason our ancient ancestors anthropomorphized God so often in the Biblical text was so they could connect to something, anything. We read of God's outstretched hand and Moses seeing God's backside. It is not surprising that the name Israel, or *Yisrael* in Hebrew, the name given to the patriarch Jacob and to us as a people, means "one who struggles with God." The Jewish people wrestle with this concept. Questioning God's existence or not having a solid personal theology is one-hundred percent

acceptable. Know that you are in good company regardless of what you think about God. You're not alone.

However, throughout the ages there have been attempts to concretize aspects of God. The 12th century Sephardic philosopher, Torah scholar, and all-around genius, Maimonides, came up with his 13 Principles of Faith that have become widely accepted throughout the Orthodox world and are recited every day after the morning prayers in more traditional communities. Several of the principles focus on God.

Principle 1: God exists; God is perfect in every way, eternal, and the cause of all that exists. All other beings depend upon God for their existence.

Principle 2: God has absolute and unparalleled unity.

Principle 3: God is incorporeal—without a body.

Principle 10: God knows the actions of humans and is not neglectful of them.

Principle 11: God rewards those who obey the commandments of the Torah and punishes those who violate its prohibitions.

As a people who wrestle with God, it might be hard to get behind all or any of these statements. Personally, I have issues with the last two. How can Maimonides be so confident?

The Reform Movement has wrestled with God since its formation back in the 19th century. Four times, its leaders have written Platforms which have more or less echoed the sentiments of their rabbinate and community.

In 1885, they write about “the consciousness of the indwelling of God in man” and the “God-idea.” God is thus internal and not “out there.” Perhaps that voice of reason we hear at times is God.

In 1937, God is depicted as the one “who rules the world through law and love... Though transcending time and space, He is the indwelling Presence of the world. We worship Him as the Lord of the universe and as our merciful Father.” I do not care for the patriarchal nature of God presented here, but but I do appreciate how this God is remarkably different than the one 50 years earlier.

In 1976, the authors speak more to our name, Israel, writing, “we have experienced and conceived of God in many ways. The trials of our own time and the challenges of modern culture have made steady belief and clear understanding difficult for some. Nevertheless, we ground our lives, personally and communally, on God's reality and remain open to new experiences and conceptions of the Divine.” Put another way, God is real and manifests in myriads of ways.

And lastly in 1999, my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Richard Levy z”l, wrote, “We affirm the reality and oneness of God, even as we may differ in our understanding of the Divine presence... We encounter God's presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the experiences of everyday life.” God is more a feeling than a force of nature or controlling energy. God is present in both holy and mundane moments.

I appreciate how there is flexibility in what to believe. Thankfully, Judaism does not make anyone, either Jews by birth or Jews by choice, profess allegiance to any one belief. After all, Judaism is more about deed than creed. One can be Jewish and not believe in God. One of my favorite quotes about belief in God comes from the current Executive Director of Sefaria, Daniel Septimus. He writes, “So, must a Jew believe in God? In a sense, it depends how you define four words: “must,” “Jew,” “believe,” and, of course, “God.” In short: probably. And probably not.”² This has to be one of the best Jewish answers ever.

² <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/must-a-jew-believe-in-god/>

I never shared my own theology in that High Holy Day sermon a decade ago. So here goes.

While I would not consider myself a mystic, I strongly connect with a kabbalistic interpretation of God. Simply put: it's all God and nothing else. You, me, this lectern and microphone, the sun, and the furthest galaxy from us in the cosmos, and beyond; it's all God. Kabbalistic terminology uses the term *ein sof*, "no end," "infinite," to describe God. God has no beginning and no end. God, or however you want to refer to God, is not bordered by anything and has no definition. It's everything and no-thing.

Since we are part of God and within God, then trying to communicate with God is futile. There is no relationship to be had. God won't and can't tell us what to do. God has no control over our lives or even knows us as individuals. God neither heals nor hurts. God certainly doesn't care who wins the Super Bowl.

My teacher, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, once explained that the goal for us is to realize that we have been all along, contrary to our illusions, a dimension of the Divine. There are times in each of our lives, if we are lucky, when we understand this. It's comparable to a droplet of water that is part of the ocean. For a split second that droplet becomes part of a cresting wave and it momentarily detaches from the ocean and then immediately gets consumed right back into it. In that instant the droplet can sense it is part of something much greater than itself. Those moments for us are fleeting and it's usually not until sometime afterwards when we realize what just happened.

This belief that I currently hold will probably change over time. There are certainly holes in it. I can't answer why bad things happen to good people or why natural disasters decimate communities. Why some experience pain and others don't. Why some seem lucky their whole lives and others can't catch a break. But with this perspective, none of these questions really make any sense to begin with because they assume God as other, as an entity that has a relationship with every creature and ordains events to happen. In my view, God is not a power who has the capability or

motivation to interfere in our lives. We are part of God as a cell is part of our bodies and perhaps by observing everything around us in this way, we might treat others better and appreciate every moment.

My friends, as we enter the New Year and spend a lot of time together in services over the next two weeks referring to God over and over, I invite you to open up, to yourselves and your friends and family, about your own personal theology. Don't be bashful. No one knows any more about God than anyone else. No one is an expert, including Maimonides. You just might unlock an idea that someone else has been searching for their whole lives and they might have the missing piece to your puzzle.

Shanah tovah: may you all have a year filled with sweetness, love, and good health and may your relationships with each other, and even with God, deepen and grow stronger.