Let's Talk About God

A couple weeks ago during our Shofar sounding workshop, I opened the session with a question. I asked, "What is Rosh Hashanah really all about?" Think about how you would answer right now. What is the central theme of this holy time? Most of the people who chimed in said, "It's the New Year"; "It's the time to seek forgiveness"; "It's the time to change one's ways." All of these are correct. But I was searching for something else. So I asked, "When you hear the sound of the shofar, what other sound or instrument and setting does it make you think of?" One participant finally said, "Oh, just tell us Rabbi!" The sounding of the shofar, I said, is no different that the blasts of trumpets in a palace which signals the entrance of the king. Rosh Hashanah is really all about God.

Last night and today we, once again, symbolically crown God as our King through elaborate services. Think about it. Almost every prayer and reading we utter has to do with God. God's name is literally on nearly every page of this *mahzor*. It's a God-fest. "The constantly recurring thoughts in these beautiful songs [that we sing on Rosh Hashanah] are God as creator, God as King, God as judge."[1]

Regarding our friends who attended the workshop: are any of us surprised that no one thought of God when I asked these questions? Usually before a concert, or other performance, many of us will talk about the stars we're about to see. I remember talking for days about Dave Matthews before seeing him live. Or Michael Crawford before seeing him play the Phantom. Or Joe Montana before my first 49ers game! But who among us spoke to another person about the excitement of engaging with the central character of Rosh Hashanah: God?

These days it seems that God is a topic that many of us feel uncomfortable talking about. This was even the case in rabbinical school, believe it or not. Maybe it feels too personal. Maybe we're embarrassed about what we feel. Maybe we don't even know what we feel. Maybe we don't believe in the depths of our hearts that God exists. There have been several instances when parents have called me saying that their children don't want to become a bar or bat mitzvah because they don't believe in God. For those of you who feel the same way, I say to you as I say to the parents, "That's great! I can't wait to hear more about it." And most importantly, "They are not alone."

I know what some of you might be thinking, "Are there really Jews who don't believe in God? And they're here on one of the holiest days of the year." As my family from Fargo says, "You bethcha!"

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[1] Moshe Segal, "The Religion of israel Before Sinai," Jewish Quarterly Review 52 (1963): 242.

I'd like to ask you a few questions and I want you to answer them with complete honesty. No one is going to judge you. (Well except God, but don't mind that.) Here we go:

Raise your hand if you have ever questioned the existence of God.
Raise your hand if God, whatever that means, has little to no impact on your life.
Raise your hand if you have issues with our texts describing God with human characteristics and emotions.

Did you see how many people raised their hands? First of all, to all of you I say that you are in good company. Second of all, what's going on here? How is it that so many people sitting here on Rosh Hashanah feel a bit uneasy about God?

This is not surprising. According to last year's highly talked about Pew research study on Judaism, only 15% of Jews surveyed think that being Jewish is mainly a matter of religion or faith. 28% of Jews don't believe in God. And 68% of all Jews surveyed said that a person can be Jewish if they don't believe in God. This includes Jews from all backgrounds and denominations.

This phenomenon is not a fad either. Jews have been wrestling with the God concept ever since we met God!

My friend Rabbi Ryan Bauer notes that "We were called 'the People of Israel' long before we were ever known as 'the Jewish people.'" And how did we get this name, Israel? You probably recall that our patriarch Jacob was traveling in the desert on his way to confront his brother Esau after many years apart. (Remember he stole the birthright and blessing and, well, it was a mess.) The evening before their emotional reunion, Jacob wrestles all night long with someone. Jacob wants to know who this is and he is told that he has been wrestling with the Divine. No one wins the match. But Jacob does receive a new name, Yisrael, which means, "One who struggles with God." That is our namesake. We are the people who wrestle with God.

Think about how unique this is. We don't expect blind faith from anyone who is or wishes to be a part of the Jewish family. Conversion students are welcomed in regardless of whether they believe in God or not. B'nei Mitzvah students earn their certificate even if they have doubts. Islam, on the other hand, means submission to God and Christianity's core concept is unquestioning belief in the trinity. If you don't believe, you might feel like an outsider. This is what many conversion students have told me. But the opposite seems to hold true for Judaism: if you struggle with the meaning and concept of God, you're in the right place.

Jacob is not the only biblical Jew to have wrestled with God. Moses too, our greatest prophet and the one person in the entire Hebrew Bible who had a relationship with God unlike any other character, was also a skeptic. Moses even climbed Mount Sinai and

saw God "face-to-face" and still was not convinced. Afterwards, he pleads, "Oh, let me behold your presence!" How much more evidence does he need? He should have been satisfied. In his very unique spiritual journey, Moses had moments of doubt and frustration.

My rabbi and teacher, Larry Kushner explains why it might be that Jews struggle so much with God. He writes, "Not only is God's name made of vowel letters and therefore effectively the sound of breathing, and not only is the only thing God says at Sinai the letter *aleph*, which is only the noise you make as you begin to make any sound. But God doesn't look like anything at all. You simply can't sell this sort of stuff in shopping malls and airports:

"What's this God's name?"
"The sound of breathing."
What's this God say?"
"Only the softest, barely audible noise."
"And what's this God look like?"
"Nothing!"[2]

No wonder so many of us question and doubt God's existence. There's nothing to grasp.

Throughout our history all the major Jewish philospohers each had different concepts of God. It's like the joke about two Jews with three opinions. For instance, in the first century, Philo believed that God is the soul of the universe and thus God is completely unknowbale. We can't even attempt to describe God, let alone see God.

In the thirteenth century, the great Maimonides taught that we can not say what God is, but rather what God isn't and whatever we call God is inadequate for our language is limited.

Isaac Luria, a leader of 16th century kabbalah, thought that God is the *ein sof*, or the endless and infinite one who is totally unknowable by the human mind.

Spinoza, that 17th century scholar famous for being excommunicated, believed that God is the totality of the universe and the more we know about the natural world, the more we know about God. In other words, the cosmos is God.

The 20th century philospher, Martin Buber believed that God is an eternal presence waiting for us to encouter God by way of our relationships with others. God can not be defined, but only met in special moments.

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[2] Lawrence Kushner. *Eyes Remade for Wonder,* Jewish Lights, Woodstock. 1998. p. 142

Mordechai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, taught that God is the totality of forces in the world and thus has no appearence. There is no supernatural control over the world. Instead, according to Kaplan, our job is to bring moral responsibility and action into our community.

And finally Erich Fromm, a 20th century German pyschologist who helped inform Jewish Humanism believed that God is a symbol, an idea, of our highest potential and not a reality in itself. Our idea of God places God in the world.

Even the various platforms of the Reform Movement have described God in multiple ways. In 1885, the leading rabbis wrote that God is an idea. In 1976 they stress "God's reality" and that all humans are created in the Divine image. In 1999, my teacher Rabbi Levy wrote that "We encounter God's presence in moments of awe and wonder, in acts of justice and compassion, in loving relationships and in the expereinces of everyday life."

Taken all together what we come to understand is that God is a complete mystery. Totally unknowable. There is no consensus about what God is or isn't. These rabbis and philosophers contradict each other at times and there is no attempt to resolve their diversity of views. In fact, this diversity is welcomed.

Woody Allen once said, "If only God would give me a clear sign of his existence. Like making a large deposit in my name in a Swiss bank account."[3]

Despite all of the ambiguity about God, our tradition does include some strains that denied the value of Divine skepticsm. Maimonides, perhaps the greatest Jewish mind, thought that Judaism needed a series of statements that defined what all Jews ought to believe. As Daniel Gordis writes, this was "something akin to today's Catholic "catechism."[4] His widely accepted Thirteen Principles of Faith which includes belief in God is part Jewish liturgy.

Our very prayer books assume we all have a confident belief in God. I remember getting really upset about this when I was younger. I asked my parents why they were saying all of these words and prayers if they didn't truly mean them. For someone who is a skeptic, I fully understand how challeneging it is coming to services.

In addition to our siddurim, nearly all Jewish life-cycle events mention God from baby namings to bar mitzvahs to weddings, funerals and everything in between. Even the less religious holidays like Chanukah and Purim include lots of God language and God isn't even mentioned in the megillah!

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[3] Woody Allen, "Selections from the Allen Notebooks," in *Woody Allen, Without Feathers*, p. 10

[4] Daniel Gordis. *God Was Not in the Fire*. Scribner, New York. 1995. p. 50

So how do we deal with all of this? How do we reconcile our doubts when it comes to practicing our traditions? How can we find meaning in all that we do in Jewish life if we aren't as sure about God as Maimonides was?

Furthermore, how do we handle "Judaism's tenuous balance between legitimating skepticism on the one hand, but insisting that we not dismiss God entirely on the other?"[5]

And if a Jew wrestles with the God concept, is there still purpose and meaning that he/she can derive from Judaism and more specifically the high Holy Days?

These questions are not inteneded to be answered right away. But they should be answered by each of us individually over the course of our lives. No one can answer them for us.

Personally, the question of *belief* rarely crosses my mind. I just can't say for sure. I'd like to say that I only believe in something that is real. Something that my five senses can detect. When asked if I believe in God by an interfaith panel moderater at Skagit Valley College earlier this year, I replied, "It really makes no difference whether I believe or not, because what is, is and I hope to be open to any experience that will let me feel God's presence." For me, this is not about belief, but about experience and journey.

It's about being open to a Divine encounter and not letting my intellect and critical mind inform every decision I make. Stories in our traditon about encounters with God, from Abraham to Elijah urge us not to wait for conclusive evidence before opening ourselves to the possibility of God. Over thinking God will only rob us from an opportunity to feel something that is completely mysterious.

When the Israelites receive the Torah at Sinai, they say in unison, *na'aseh v'nishmah*, "We will do and then we will listen." Or, put another way, "We will experience the mitzvot first and then we will try to make sense of it all." This seems completely backwards, but Judaism sees value in this approach. Perhaps by engaging in something first we will later come to understand it's meaning in a deeper and more profound way than had we taken the normal route.

So for me, truth is irrelevent. I want something more substantial--a relationship.

For Gordis, relationship implies "gradual growth and learning with fits and starts, with periods of tremendous progress as well as deeply frustrating...times. Relationships develop, often unpredictably."[6] This is what I seek: to get in the ring and wrestle.

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[5] ibid, p. 52

[6] ibid, p. 55

And Jewish tradition encourages us, even pushes us to not give up the struggle.

For instance, in 1994, the URJ refused membership to a synagogue that had taken out references of God from its liturgy. The Reform movement's leaders were not suggesting that all Reform Jews needed to declare with conviction a belief in God. However, they understood that to get out of the ring and give up the search would be like throwing away a central component of Judaism, one that provides it with much depth and richness.

Oftentimes I learn more about myself and Judaism from my students than from published scholars and teachers. This past May, Max Johnson became a bar mitzvah and he spoke quite candidly about his struggle with God.

He said, "I don't think I have a relationship with God, though I think it would be amazing if I did...I simply have a hard time believing that God acted at all, from creating the universe in 6 days to splitting the Red Sea. It just doesn't seem scientifically possible. However, what I learned...is that even if these stories feel like camp fire stories, they can still have lots of wisdom in them. It is also okay and even encouraged to ask questions even if you don't believe in them. I learned that I can be a good Jew even if I don't believe in God. Maybe my beliefs will change over time. Who knows?

"One thing that I found really interesting is that the word Yisrael means "one who struggles with God." So, now I don't feel so much like an outsider to the Jewish people since our name actually says that it's perfectly normal to struggle and doubt. I feel lucky to be a part of a people who value this and that I am not forced to believe in any one thing.

"I used to think that coming to temple was just all about praying to God and thanking God for everything. While this might be true for some people, I now see coming to temple as something that connects me with my Jewish ancestors. For me, this is more about family than about God."

Talk about *naches*! I think Max probably speaks to many of us who are also on a spiritual journey.

My friends, as we make our way through this *mahzor* and the High Holy Days let us remind ourselves that doubt fuels the Jewish spiritual journey which can be a lifelong quest. And the starting point of this journey is not belief, but skepticsm and struggle, just as it was for our patriarchs.

Judaism is so unique and special in that it desires to meet us where we are. It takes our bewildrement and the feelings we have deep down in our *kishkes* seriously.

So for those in this room that have entered the ring, I pray that you find what you are seeking even if it is frustrating at times. And for those here that are waiting on the sidelines, my message to you is, get in there and be open to a realtionship. One good thing about this wrestling match is you won't feel any pain.

May this New Year be one of sweetness and love for you and those you care about and may it also be one of discovery and profound relationships.
Shanah Tovah