

Searching for God in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Yom Kippur Sermon – 5771  
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Several weeks ago, I attended and helped to conduct a bar mitzvah ceremony for the son of a friend of mine outside of Oklahoma City. There was a party on Saturday evening at the home of these friends and I found myself drawn into a conversation in which I was asked by another friend of the family, let’s call him Joe, if I thought it was possible for a young person to disbelieve in God and still authentically celebrate this rite of passage of becoming bar or bat mitzvah. My answer came out instinctively and unequivocally. Yes, I said, it was certainly possible.

For me, this was not at all a hypothetical question. I imagine a good number of people here today might remember a bat mitzvah ceremony that took place at Kol HaLev a few years ago in which the bat mitzvah built her entire d’var Torah around asserting her identity as a Jewish atheist. I shared that story with Joe as part of my response to his question, and it intrigued him enough that he was motivated to pursue his inquiry further, so he proceeded to ask me about my own, personal beliefs and questions about God.

At that point, I felt obliged to pull up a chair, and my wife Andy, who had been standing next to me for his initial question and my answer, wisely walked away from the table, realizing that it might be quite a while before I would be ready to join her in the line for dinner.

I imagine there may be some people here who are curious to hear about how I answered this second question from Joe, and I would be more than happy to discuss that at some point with anyone who is interested. But what struck me most profoundly about this experience, and what I would like to think about with you this morning, was simply how rare a thing it is, that this kind of question is even put on the table. I came away from this discussion wanting to think more about the role of God-talk within the Jewish community as a whole and within our Reconstructionist corner of it in particular.

I don’t know if anyone has ever done any kind of formal research on this question, but it is my strong sense, based on my personal and professional experience in the Jewish community, that Jewish people, especially those of us on the liberal end of the spectrum, just do not seem as comfortable talking about God as our counterparts in other religious traditions. That was certainly the case in my own life as I was growing up.

In my family, we often had lively and interesting conversations about lots of things; politics, race relations, the nuances of human relationships, but God was just not a topic that came up very often. However, I had this friend named Bobby, who lived around the block from us, and who came from a family of Southern Baptists, and it seemed to me that he was constantly wanting to talk about God. Despite my lack of experience with that type of conversation, I found that I quite enjoyed and felt energized by the challenge of trying to wrap my mind and words around something that was clearly important, but also too large and mysterious to allow for any ultimate resolution.

Against the backdrop of those discussions with Bobby, I became acutely aware of the absence of attention being given to God in the various parts of my Jewish life, whether it was my family, or my religious school classes at the temple, or even in the sermons given by our rabbi. The message I slowly

began to absorb was that when it came to religion, we Jews were primarily interested in issues that were focused in a concrete way on the moral and ethical challenges of living in this world.

But, when questions of ultimate purpose or meaning would come up, that transcended the moral dimension; questions dealing with the nature of God or the destiny of the human soul, these tended to be dismissed with vague aphorisms or defined as concerns on which our community did not place a particularly high priority. I deeply respected and appreciated what I was taught about the importance of moral integrity within a Jewish framework, but I was also aware that, at least for me, something significant was missing.

This tension that I perceived, between my own spiritual orientation and what seemed to be available from the religious tradition of my birth, launched me on a decades-long spiritual quest. My path has taken me into the exploration of eastern religion, into a year of study at a traditional yeshiva in Jerusalem and eventually into a six year process of rabbinical training at the Reconstructionist Rabbinical College.

Along the way, I discovered some important things about the version of Judaism I had grown up with. I came to understand that the perceived dichotomy within the Jewish community, between a Jewish focus on our moral lives in this world and what often got framed as a Christian focus on otherworldly concerns, such as the nature of the afterlife, or cultivating a connection to God, was a huge oversimplification.

I realized that what I perceived as a Jewish reluctance to discuss anything that threatened to go beyond the realm of rational discourse was not intrinsic to our tradition. Rather, it was more a function of the influence of the values of the modern period in general; values such as rationality and pragmatism that the Jewish community, especially in the United States, had enthusiastically and relatively uncritically embraced.

And, at some point, I had the pleasure of being introduced to the thinking of Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, whose social scientifically based perspective on religion taught me that what Jews, or any other people for that matter, had traditionally believed about God, was constantly evolving. And he modeled the importance of participating in this evolutionary process by developing his own convictions about God as a force rather than a being, and therefore equally available to all individuals and communities. What was most striking for me about Mordecai Kaplan was that he had somehow embraced the very pragmatism and rationalism that I had previously seen as a detriment to modern Jewish life and integrated it in such a way that it made the tradition deeper and more meaningful.

The contemporary world of Jewish spirituality is very different, and more welcoming, compared to the one in which I grew up, and that is in no small part due to the disproportional influence of Kaplan's thinking and of the Reconstructionist movement overall, on how American Jews in particular approach and engage with Jewish tradition. Even though most Jews today, including many members of the contemporary Reconstructionist movement, would not necessarily identify as theological disciples of Mordecai Kaplan, there is no question that we owe him a great debt of gratitude. We have all benefitted from the way in which he courageously challenged the narrow range of acceptable understandings of God within the American and later global Jewish community and from the theological elbow room that was created as a result.

What that has meant for our movement over the course of the past half century is that when it comes to theology, we have been, I believe, much more open than other parts of the liberal Jewish world. There is no better example of this than our prayer book, Kol Haneshamah, which has some pretty thought provoking and out of the box things to say about what God may or may not be. And yet, as I think back to my own sense of surprise in response to being asked about my views of God at the recent bar mitzvah celebration, I wonder if we are still in certain ways not under the influence of this mistaken notion that as Jews, we are not supposed to worry too much this God thing, at least in a personal way. After all, how often do we intentionally initiate conversations with one another in which the focus is on our beliefs about or our experiences of connecting with God/Divinity? I know that every year I devote one ninety minute session of our B'nai mitzvah family cohort study to addressing this question, and part of one of the Reconstructionism 101 sessions does this as well, but other than that, I have had trouble coming up with any other built in opportunities for us at Kol HaLev to take the plunge into this kind of conversation. I realize that it is not unusual in the context of Torah study to find ourselves engaged in some kind of discussion about God, but my sense is that for the most part, in those moments, we are more focused on critiquing a Biblical image of God in some way, rather than sharing from a place of personal exploration.

For some of us, God may truly be a non-issue, which of course is fine. But for others of us, there really is something at stake, in the extent to which we feel we can articulate our current best intuition of what God may be, and experience a sense of connection to God or Divinity in our day to day lives. This was brought home to me in a powerful way, just within the last month as a number of us gathered together for a three session mini-course based on the new book, Making Prayer Real. While my intent had been to use the three sessions to introduce some of foundational ideas from various sections of the book, what I found was that, at least among the people who attended these sessions, there was a veritable flood of personal experience and struggle around prayer, spirituality and God that became the focus of our time together. For myself, and I believe for the other people in attendance, these conversations felt like some of the most meaningful and important we had ever had in our community.

If we look around at the broader Jewish and Western worlds, it appears to me that there is a trend towards a renewed interest in exploring our images and experience of the Divine. This is especially telling given the spate of strident declarations in recent years, by people with names such as Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens, denouncing the religious enterprise as a whole and specifically the search for God in any form.

One recent and interesting general source of inquiry into contemporary attitudes toward belief in God is the book, Fingerprints of God by the National Public Radio Religion correspondent Barbara Bradley Hagerty. The book is one part spiritual autobiography and one part investigation of the interface between science and religion. Hagerty's overarching question hinges on whether the scientific exploration of religious and spiritual life will lead to a turning away from God or the opposite. She conducts a series of fascinating interviews with a wide range of researchers who, as a group, do not come down clearly on either side of her question. And her conclusion is that the scientific view of religion is actually a wide open issue at this point, with equal amounts of evidence pointing towards a more materialist view of our world on one hand, verses one of a world infused with spirit on the other.

Another important voice in this conversation about the role of Divinity in our lives is celebrated author Karen Armstrong whose latest publication, The Case for God, illustrates the many ways in which modern people have completely misunderstood the purposes and function of religious life. She argues that both

atheism and fundamentalist religion make a basic mistake in assuming that religion is primarily about belief, when in fact it is about the human experience of Divinity and the transformation that can come about as a result.

Turing to the Jewish world, there have been a number of writings with a theological focus published within the past several years. One of the most noteworthy is by the renowned scholar of Jewish mysticism and Hasidic thought, Rabbi Arthur Green. His book comes with the eye-catching title, *Radical Judaism*, and in it, he lays out in challenging but accessible language, a view of God, and an experience of God quite unlike much of what is typically presented within a Jewish framework.

For me his words are so powerful and gripping that I feel compelled to quote them directly, rather than paraphrase. He writes, “the sacred refers to an inner mysterious sense of awesome presence, a reality deeper than the kind we ordinarily experience . . . when the mask of ordinariness falls away, our consciousness is left with a moment of nakedness, a confrontation with a reality that we do not know how to put into language . . . the astonishment of such moments . . . is the starting point of my religious life . . . these moments fill us with a sense of magnificence, of smallness and of belonging all at once. . . . God (he argues) is not an intellectual proposition, but rather the ground of life itself. It is the name I give to the reality I encounter in the kind of moment I have been describing. One that feels more authentic and deeply perceptive of truth than any other. I believe that every human being is capable of such experience, and that these moments place us in contact with the elusive inner essence of being that I call “God.”

In fancy theological language, Green’s point of view is referred to as panentheism, or the belief that Divinity both completely suffuses the world and simultaneously transcends it. I confess to feeling personally compelled by this particular image of God and the potential it carries for supporting an experience of connection.

But what I think is most important about any of this new theological reflection is not the specific ideas or insights they contain. It is rather that they symbolize a resurgence, among thoughtful, sophisticated people of attaching importance to be actively thinking about and reaching towards a connection with the source of the mystery of our own existence; a process that is by definition never ending and inherently in need of regular and mindful cultivation.

It is my hope that within the Jewish world in general, within the Reconstructionist movement, and right here at Kol HaLev, there will be a growing openness to more conversation about the place of God in our lives, however we define that, and a willingness to experiment with new and ancient ways of connecting with this deeper level of awareness. Both within the “official” contexts of synagogue services and Torah study, and at any other time or place that we feel would be helpful. This is exactly the path our tradition would have us take, and of course, Bobby would be very proud.

Good Yuntif, Tzom Kal, Gmar Hatimah Tovah.