

PURIM 2010

In previous years, I have argued that God is not a man. Tonight, I wish to add the following: neither is God an ink blot.

Today, in 2010, the progressive Jewish community finds itself at a crossroads. Either we need to meet this God-concept head on and try to make sense of it, by which I mean try to come up with a limited number of alternatives that satisfy the modern soul. Or we could scrap the God-concept altogether as a mere relic of the past. But one thing we probably can't do is go back to the old-time Lord of the Bible. And one thing I pray we stop doing is continuing to treat this concept like an ink blot, which means all things to all people and thus, for all practical purposes, means nothing.

This past year in the Jewish-Islamic Dialogue Society, the topic of God came up frequently, especially in our earliest sessions. One after another, the Muslims who spoke offered a tribute to God – and yes, the conceptions of divinity they invoked were strikingly similar and recognizable to any Western ear. What was even more interesting, though, were the comments by the Jewish speakers. For every one who believed in God, there was another who found the idea to be unhelpful, meaningless, or just plain antiquated. After one of the sessions, I woke up in the middle of the night, agitated, and searched for poll numbers on the extent of religious belief among American Jews today. The results couldn't have been clearer; the membership of JIDS was quite representative. Roughly half of American Jews are functionally atheistic or agnostic, and those who do believe share a range of ideas, many of which are hardly consistent with the words about Adonai that emerge from Scripture. Moreover, what the polls didn't address, but what I also take to be true, is that many Jews who do call themselves believers in a non-traditional deity have probably not thought very much about what they actually believe. Doubtless, their views reflect the product of their own occasional deliberations, with little support or encouragement from their synagogues, and if asked to delineate and defend their beliefs they would probably struggle to do so.

Is all this a sign that the Jewish religion is healthy? Or is the opposite true? The answer, if you ask me, is a little bit of both. It is to our credit that so many Jews are rational and skeptical enough to question the existence of a cosmic Santa Claus who bestows miracles from the heavens and punishes those who doubt His holy magic. In fact, however, the idea of God can also harmonize well with modernity. It is frequently embraced by philosophers, scientists and other contemporary thinkers, albeit in a different form than that which emerges from the Torah or Talmud. Why, then, aren't more Jews steeped in these modern alternative approaches to divinity? Why have so many decided simply to reject the old-fashioned, anthropomorphic God, rather than exploring whether there is a God that is truly worthy of the name? And why do those who continue to search find such scant assistance from most congregational rabbis and Jewish scholars?

One very disturbing reason for our lack of sophistication about God can be traced to a particular notion of modern Jewish pride. Call it our response to the statement held by many religious fundamentalists that theirs is the one truth faith. The clear majority of Jews don't subscribe to that nonsense. We take as one of our religion's greatest virtues that it refuses to condone such claims. Jews praise ourselves as a people of God-wrestlers who view different theologies with skepticism, and dare to be people of *doubt* as well as faith. Much as Socrates was declared the world's wisest man because he best understood the breadth of his ignorance, we Hebrews love our ability to doubt ... to question ... and ultimately to accept all human beings – theists, atheists, you name it – as fellow travelers in a voyage with no clear destination.

Ah, but here's the rub. We are not Unitarians-Universalists. UUs don't merely wrestle with the ultimate questions and tolerate a variety of perspectives, they also view all texts with a detached skepticism. As a result, they have no Bible. By contrast, we *do* have a Bible ... and a God. If you don't believe me, just attend a few of our services, and you'll be hearing about this God in prayer after prayer, hour after hour – the focus is always the same. “Thank you Lord. We love you Lord. Please help us Lord.”

But, you might ask, if modern Jews have such a focus, how then can we proclaim that we're so different from our Muslim and Christian cousins? What makes us so tolerant and open-minded

about matters of belief, if our worship services are as God oriented as anyone else's? The answer lies in the doctrine that generates perhaps the most satisfaction among Jews today: that we are not defined by our dogma or our faith, so much as by our *actions*.

There you have it, the so-called secret behind Jewish greatness. It's widely viewed as the reason why, as David Brooks recently boasted in a New York Times op-ed piece, Jews represent "54 percent of the world chess champions, 27 percent of the Nobel physics laureates and 31 percent of the medicine laureates, ... 21 percent of the Ivy League student bodies, 26 percent of the Kennedy Center honorees, 37 percent of the Academy Award-winning directors, 38 percent of those on a recent Business Week list of leading philanthropists, [and] 51 percent of the Pulitzer Prize winners for nonfiction." Pretty good for a group that, as Brooks points out, consists of only two percent of the American population and .2% of the world's.

The idea that Jews have a text and a God is supposedly what grounds us and imbues us with a sense of meaning in life. But that sense of meaning would not turn into a thirst for *accomplishment* were it not for our action focus. Jews don't have an analogue to the Shahada of Islam or the Nicene Creed. We're not required to state our faith in God, let alone our trust in Moses as God's greatest prophet. Supposedly, what makes a Jew is his willingness to *act* Jewishly – to pursue peace and justice, and to observe the Commandments. If he does so purely out of a sense of duty to his people, rather than a faith in God, that is his business.

Can you see why this attitude has had such a successful run in the modern world? It has produced a race of high achieving people, fueled by incredible feats in the fields that Western society values the most. It has enabled these people to see themselves as part of something larger – a race not merely of overachievers but of modern thinkers, steeped in an ethos that respects intellectual freedom. Adam the atheist? Come on down! Tamar the traditionalist? Come on down! Samuel the Spinozist? You too, come on down! You're the next contestant on the Price is Right! If you're Jewish, when it comes to what you're thinking or feeling, the price is always right: absolutely *free* ... as long as you do well in school, stay out of trouble, get a good job, and stay active in your religious community, you can believe or feel whatever you please and nobody will question your religiosity.

So how does God fit into all of this? I don't mean God as a figure in the Torah, or God as a word you hear spoken in Hebrew at shul; I mean God as an object of reverence, or as Paul Tillich would say, God as an *ultimate concern*. What does all this emphasis on action have on the power of Jewish belief? Theoretically, it needn't have any detrimental effect. But in practice, that's another story.

The truth is that in contemporary progressive synagogues, we relate to God in two ways. First, as a fictional character in our ancient texts who reemerges in our communal prayers. And second, as a modern symbol that we do our very best to strip of all social content -- in other words, as an ink blot.

To traditional Muslims and Christians, God is very real and so are His prophets. When imams or ministers talk about Jesus as the son of a virgin mother (and yes, that is preached in both religions), or when they speak of God as a worker of miracles with a capital M, it's assumed they're speaking literally. By contrast, in a Reform synagogue, you'll hear *stories* about God parting the Red Sea or appearing to Moses in the form of a burning bush, but if a rabbi talks about such passages, he must imply that these are *stories*, not statements of historical fact. As for God's attributes – Islam has 99 of them, and Judaism has them as well. God can be spoken of as loving, just, merciful ... but any Reform rabbi worth his or her salt will say that we use those terms for God only metaphorically or symbolically.

It's as if the various rabbinical colleges got together and decided that all you have to say is "I mean this metaphorically," and you can sound modern. How's this: "a dog is an animal with feathers that flies in the sky, metaphorically." As long as you stick in that word, you can point to any ancient text and read anything at all, and your flock will think you're profound and hip. That seems to be what rabbis believe.

You'll forgive the traditional Christian or Muslim preacher if he feels uneasy about resorting to such a sleight of hand. He'll tell you straight up, "you're darned right Jesus rose from the dead," or "Muhammad absolutely was visited by the Angel Gabriel." And he won't finish his teaching with the phrase, "of course, we only mean this metaphorically." I may disagree with what the

preacher is saying, but at least I can respect his candor. To me, the use of the metaphor tag-line is reminiscent of that season of the TV Show *Dallas* that was later explained away simply as one character's dream. Sometimes, when I'm listening to modern Jews parse the words and syllables of the Torah to uncover the secrets about God, only to explain later that they don't really believe that God is "jealous," "wrathful," or "merciful," or otherwise acts in accordance with a "plan," it's as if the entire discussion of the Torah was one big dream sequence.

If the God of the Torah isn't real, why is it that 90 percent of our prayer services are devoted to Him? And why are most of our synagogue discussions devoted to students of this God who lived long before we realized such basic scientific facts as that the earth revolves around the Sun, or that physical processes evolve over time according to natural laws and not the dictates of human-like agency?

In progressive Judaism, theology has become an afterthought, a mere distraction. Those who seek authenticity can get that from the Torah – in other words, Bible stories, and all the facts, figures and interpretations that stem from them. Those who seek spirituality can get that from prayer – say some old-fashioned words and sing some Hebraic melodies, and allow them to transport you to a place of your own choosing, grounded by whatever conception of God your ink blot tells you to believe in, or *not* believe in. It may sound like I'm trivializing the benefits of Torah study or prayer. I'm not. I have a need for that too. But I also have a need for theology, for deepening my understanding about what it is we might possibly be referring to when we invoke the divine name. *That* is the need that contemporary progressive Judaism is so haplessly ill-equipped to meet.

This past year, I've been conducting research on what hopefully will be a third book. I have in mind writing a non-fiction work on the topic of God. In preparation, I sought out modern theology wherever I could find it. And I must say, most of the more interesting works did *not* come from within the Jewish tradition. This is unfortunate, but hardly surprising.

As an example of the pathos of modern Jewish theology, I give you the teachings of Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionism, who is generally viewed to be part of the pantheon of

20th century, progressive Jewish thinkers. To Kaplan, God is not a supernatural being, but rather the power that makes for all things desirable. Specifically, he refers to God at different points as “the power that makes for salvation,” “the power that makes for social regeneration,” “the power that makes for the regeneration of human nature,” “the power that makes for cooperation,” “the power that makes for freedom,” and “the power that makes for righteousness.”

Get the idea? I’m not sure I do. Is Kaplan’s God “power” envisioned as a single, real-world superbeing who must contest with other real-world forces or superbeings? His commentators say otherwise. Then again, it also doesn’t appear that Kaplan was envisioning God as Being itself, or the ground of Being. After all, such a God would presumably also include the power that makes for destruction, despair, divisiveness, and slavery – none of which Kaplan wants to talk about in connection with divinity. In the end, Kaplan’s readers are left with the impression that God – not merely the name of God but also the divine essence -- is merely a symbol, an idea. To use Kaplan’s words, “we have to identify as godhood, or as the divine quality of universal being, the relationships, tendencies and agencies which in their totality go to make human life worthwhile in the deepest and most abiding sense. The divine is no less real, no less dependable for our personal salvation or self-realization, if we think of it as a quality than if we think of it as an entity or being.”

If you say so, Mordecai. After all, it’s *your* ink blot. But suffice it to say that I haven’t met too many of his theological disciples, even among Reconstructionists.

We can do better. We can find alternative approaches to divinity that are able to seize both the mind and the heart of a modern searcher. Yes, Spinoza provides one such approach, but his is not the only one. I’ve mentioned Paul Tillich, who was writing as recently as the 1960s. He is another terrific theologian, one who happens to come from the Christian tradition. And there are other brilliant modern thinkers as well. The problem is less the dearth of provocative ideas available to us about God, than the unwillingness of the progressive Jewish leadership to place wrestling with these ideas at the heart of contemporary Jewish life. To reiterate, prayer is important, but if we haven’t thought much about who or what we’re praying to, are we really living up to our potential as Jews?

Over the past couple of years, I've had a number of opportunities to address both Jewish and Unitarian-Universalist groups about the topic of God. Truth be told, of the two groups, I've found the UUs to be more engaged emotionally in the discussion. They seem to have a greater stake in figuring out what it is *they* believe. In other words, they seem to be more viscerally involved in the struggle than my fellow Jews. The irony here is palpable. We take the name "Israel" from Jacob's struggling with God. And as discussed before, we pride ourselves on being strugglers ... for peace, for justice, for truth. Perhaps, however, the difference is that what we value as truth isn't necessarily the same as what the UU's value. Because of the depth of our love affairs with our holy texts -- the Torah and our Talmud -- so much of our wrestling is directed toward discerning the deeper meaning of ancient writings. That becomes a goal in and of itself. The UUs, by contrast, are less interested in struggling with what this sage or that sage meant by God than with what they themselves mean by God -- or whether the term is more trouble than its worth.

Perhaps that makes us Jews the more mature academics, the more learned scholars. But how much does that scholarship matter unless the ultimate issues are exciting to us? It's that lack of excitement, and the lack of concern among our clergy in fostering that excitement, that most troubles me.

So, what do we do about this problem? How do we light the lamp of Jewish curiosity about the philosophy of God without impairing other facets of Jewish life?

First, we must recognize that this isn't an either-or proposition. The more grounded we are in a conception of God, the more heartfelt our praying will become. Even if we're non-traditional thinkers, we can sing traditional prayers communally and be transported by the experience. This shouldn't bother anyone, as long as enough of our shul time is devoted to exploring the modern ideas that captivate our minds. As for the concern that much of Jewish scholarship might be seen as obsolete if we come to see God differently than did our ancient ancestors, I reject that as well. Ancient Jewish texts are our family heirlooms. As pieces of history, they are thus absolutely enchanting. Moreover, anyone who has read these works realizes how enlightening they can be.

The amount of wisdom in the Talmud and Torah, particularly about questions of ethics, is seemingly infinite. While they are probably not the best sources to teach us the meaning of God, this is hardly a reason to ignore them altogether and render ourselves a Scripture-less people.

Secondly, we must ask our leaders to confront their own biases in sweeping Jewish theology under the rug. It's obvious why rabbis might want to sidestep grappling too intensely with what is meant by the word God. If they take a stand on this issue, or even just bring some hard-hitting analysis to the table, they're bound to offend a number of people. Those rabbis who sound traditional could easily put off the atheists and other heretics, whereas those who sound heretical could lose their gravitas with traditionalists. Besides, rabbis aren't in the business of recklessly behaving in a way that threatens to undermine the social unity of a congregation. Under the circumstances, it's so much easier to fall back on the principles that Jews are people of action, not dogma, and that it really doesn't matter what we believe as long as we daven, give tzedukah, and work for tikkun olam.

Perhaps the present approach is a decent enough formula for retaining those Jews who are already hooked on synagogue attendance. As I've explained, ink blot Judaism actually appeals to our chauvinist self-concept as a non-dogmatic people. Plus, it surely resonates with many that there's no point arguing about the ultimate philosophical questions since nobody has the answers anyway. I may disagree that theology is pointless, but there's no doubt it involves unanswerable questions at its core.

Unfortunately, there's more to the equation than the need to satisfy the already satisfied. Need I remind anyone just how many Jews have lost all interest in religion? At one point, perhaps only as children, they surely came to a synagogue, hoping for some intelligent comments to be made about the meaning of life. And what did they hear? Stories about miracles and "metaphors" about a superman named "God." Is it any wonder they decided that religion was not for them?

We all know how easy it is for members of the Tribe to blow off Judaism as a *faith*. You don't even have to give up your self-identity as a Jew. Forget for a moment the mantra about being a people of action and not dogma. Just think about the most influential Jews of the last couple of

centuries. Einstein. Freud. Marx. Herzl. Not one is viewed as a man of faith. And yet all are seen by many as exemplars of our people because they were grounded in Jewish *values*. Even Hillel himself, when asked to explain the essence of Judaism while standing on one foot, spoke solely about our values. Not a word was said about God.

For many, that's just fine. But not for me. I don't merely care about the Jewish people but also about the beauty of our faith. Admittedly, the heart of that faith is its values, but who can deny that one of Judaism's strongest values is the need to struggle with God? To our ancestors, God was life's ultimate concern. Their Scripture – *our* Scripture -- spoke of loving Him with all our hearts, all our soul, and all our might. Today, when we attend services, we cannot escape His name. So does it not behoove us to place the study of that name at the center of our endeavors?

Imagine bringing an exchange student from a distant culture to one of our worship services. Then imagine telling her at the end of the session, "By the way, that 'God' we've been hearing about for the last two hours ... the one whose 'loving kindness' we proclaim and who punishes the evil doers ... guess what? Most of us don't believe in Him." Do you think she'll have much respect for what she's witnessed? Don't you think she'll at least wonder why we're not talking a bit more about what we *do* believe in?

Ultimately, this is really all about a word that I've used twice already: authenticity. We need to confront the question of God intellectually, emotionally, and communally, if we want our religion to remain authentic. And when we do, we'll realize that God is not an ink blot. There are a but a limited number of coherent and potentially compelling conceptions of divinity that our species' sages have identified to date. We can choose one for ourselves, we can embark on a lifelong search to find a better one, or indeed we can decide that the word "God" has so many nonsense connotations that we are well advised to jettison every form of theism and stand up for an alternative philosophy. Let's just agree, though, that if we wish to practice Judaism *as a religion*, the one thing we mustn't do is avoid the topic altogether.

In conclusion, to be a good Jew, all you have to do is live your life so that what is harmful to yourself you do not do to others. But, I would argue, to be a *religious* Jew, you must also live

your life so that when you enter the synagogue, you are profoundly engaged by the word God in one way or another. If you're not, you might as well be at the doctor's office looking at Rorschach tests.