

God-Wrestling

It is very easy to see God these days. You just go to Blockbuster, or download from Netflix, and you can see God. You can even choose whether he looks like George Burns (pick Oh, God) or Morgan Freeman (watch Bruce Almighty) or even Hank the Angry Drunken Dwarf (in Citizen Toxie for those with a strong constitution).

It is very easy to see God these days. It's not so easy, though, to talk about God. To engage in real conversation about God. We consider ourselves more or less religious; we go to services, read prayers, and maybe even talk to God, but rarely do we really think about and almost never talk about what we believe. Why is that?

I can think of three reasons, though I'm sure there are more. I think the main reason is fear. Not so much fear of God, but fear of ridicule. People might think I'm crazy, or at best hopelessly naive if I went around talking about God. They'd think I'm some kind of religious fanatic.

Well, maybe not me, because I'm a rabbi, and if anybody should be able to talk about God, it should be the rabbi. I think its generally assumed that rabbis have perfect faith – that they don't have any questions or doubts or confusion. But I can tell you with confidence, that rabbis have as hard a time as anybody. That our religious journey is as long and as arduous as anybody's.

Which brings me to a second reason for the silence: we're not sure what we really believe. We assume that everyone else knows exactly what they believe, and we don't want to let on that we're confused. We're intimidated because somewhere along the line most of us learned that there is only one correct idea of God: God is omniscient and omnipotent: all-knowing and all-powerful. God is male; he rewards you if you're good and he punishes you if you're bad. If this didn't speak to you, or you had reservations about this definition, then you assumed you just didn't believe in God. Those of us who had a different view of God came to believe that our

view was not authentic, or not Jewish, and thus not acceptable. And if our view is unacceptable, we come to the third reason for our silence: we fear that that all-knowing and all powerful God (in whom we don't necessarily believe) might get angry, and then who knows what could happen.

So, it seems, we fear the ridicule which would come if we revealed our confusion about the God that we're afraid to talk about because something bad might happen to us. All in all, that does sound pretty scary. But the thing about fears is that when we share them, when talk about them with people we trust, they usually end up a lot less threatening.

Throughout these Holy Days, Rabbi Spilker and I have spoken about different aspects of Yisrael –People Israel, the State and the land of Israel, and this morning, we turn to the source of it all Yisrael – wrestling with God. How remarkable it is, that we are a people of faith that names itself not after Abraham, the patriarch who first acknowledged the One God, nor after Isaac, who was willing to be sacrificed for God, but for Jacob – Yisrael – the one who wrestled with God.

It is easy today to be a Jew who doesn't believe in God. We are used to relying on reason. We understand the world through scientific discovery. We have other motivations for ethical behavior, numerous sources for meaning in life. But the easy way is not always the best way. Judaism does not demand that we hold a particular, narrowly-defined set of beliefs. Everyone who has ever studied with me knows that my answer to the question “what do Jews’ believe about – fill in the blank – is “That depends.”

In fact, our foundational prayer, The “watchword of our faith” includes formulations for the believer, the atheist, and the agnostic. The believer prays: “Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad”. The atheist prays: “Shema Yisrael, I deny Eloheinu, I deny Echad.” And the agnostic prays: “Shema Yisrael, I dunno Eloheinu, I dunno Echad.”

The truth is, though, that Judaism does demand something of us in the realm of belief. The prophet Amos says: (6:5) דַּרְשׁוּ אֶת-יְהוָה, וְחַיֵּי See God and live. He does not say “find God and live.” In fact, God tells Moses “You cannot see my face, for no one can see my face and live”. Our theological mandate as Jews, then, is more in the seeking than the finding. As rabbi Tarfon teaches in Pirkei Avot: It is not incumbent upon you to finish the task. Yet, you are not free to desist from it.

So, today, as a beginning of the task of seeking God, I am going to share with you some of what I have come to believe. I share it, not to convince you of anything, but to open up the conversation, to encourage you to explore and talk about what you believe. I want to open doors which intimidation may have shut, to make the conversation less threatening.

My own journey towards God started, I think, in my second year of rabbinic school, when a teacher asked me what role God played in my life. As I fumbled around for an answer, I realized, with some surprise, that I really didn't know. E.M. Forster once said: "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" As I heard myself speak, I wondered if I really believed what I was saying.

I knew I had always believed in God, but I didn't know what that meant. I remember a part of a poem I wrote at age 15, for Confirmation: "God is a feeling deep inside us all, A very special feeling which helps us stand up tall." Its corny and naive, *and I still believe it*. But now it is just one part of a more complex picture.

I have a holistic understanding of God. That is to say that God is one – Echad-, but encompasses many different and even opposite characteristics. God is internal *and* external, familiar *and* foreign, personal *and* mysterious. God is boundless and nameless, and at the same time a loving and nurturing parent. Rabbi Harold Shulweis describes Echad As the magnet that draws together

all of the filings of our belief system and holds it together. It is the belief that everything is connected, that nothing exists in isolation. Echad is the goal we seek in Tikkun, the unity behind the diversity in the world (Harold Schulweis, Echad, 1997)

I believe that there is a dimension to the universe which will forever elude the intellect: we are in error to think that everything can be known. Abraham Joshua Heschel says that the sublime, that which inspires “radical amazement” is found not in the rational world but in the divine. This part of God encompasses all that we can't understand, that we can't even utter. It is the wonder we can feel at all things, at existence itself. We need only to make ourselves aware of the divine, of the wonder in the world.

For a long time I was satisfied with a God who was all mystery, the answer to all we cannot know no matter how far we might progress. But when I gave it some real thought, I came to realize that actually I was being lazy: that I also had to confront the nature of my personal relationship with God.

I look at my relationship with God much the same way as my relationship with people. It should be honest, sincere, caring, mutual. If I'm feeling happy or grateful or loving, I should let the other person - or God - know. We all know that relationships, especially the most important ones, aren't always happy and easy. Relationships involve all kinds of emotions and pose all kinds of challenges. They require constant communication.

In Genesis God asks Adam “*Ayeka*” "where are you?" and again asks Cain "where is your brother Abel? The tradition interprets these as rhetorical questions or tests, because, obviously God knows everything. But maybe here we should accept the plain meaning of the text: maybe God doesn't automatically know everything: we have to keep communicating with each other. We have to let God know what's going on, Let God know where we're at.

If I'm angry with someone I love, it's important, if difficult, to acknowledge it and do something constructive about it. It doesn't mean that I love the person any less. If we feel angry with God, I believe that we have to let God know. Sometimes it's necessary to put up a fight, and stand up for ourselves. Abraham argued with God about Sodom and Gomorrah, Tevya the milkman asked God "wouldja mind choosing someone else for a change?" Even the great Hassidic rabbis argued with God. So why shouldn't we? I think God can take it.

Even as we search for God, God searches for us. This means that God and humanity act in mutual affirmation. God finds us in a myriad of ways, in a myriad of moments. We must cultivate an attitude of openness to being found by God. It is in this way, I believe, that God commands. God communicates by commanding the individual soul, ending that soul's isolation for the moment. One way to know God is through observance of those mitzvot which we, as individuals, have been commanded by God.

I believe that God wants me to keep kosher, for example. I haven't always kept kosher, and only with time came to understand my decision to take on this Mitzvah as neither emotional nor intellectual, but as a moment in which God sought me, and I was open to being "found." When God asked "Ayeka" and I answered, "Hineini." Here I am.

It was at the end of Yom Kippur, 1984, when, having recently returned from my first year of Rabbinical School in Jerusalem, I prepared to break my fast with a dish of scallops. Suddenly, for no reason I could intellectually understand, I found that I couldn't do it. So I gave the scallops to my sister, and I went to the salad bar, knowing that I wouldn't be eating *Traif* again. I tell you this **not** to suggest you should keep kosher, but as an example what I believe was a personal encounter with a commanding God.

Martin Buber teaches that the awareness that God is calling us puts humanity in eternal relationship with the divine. God has given us the freedom to determine how we will respond to that call. Buber also teaches that God does not wish to be believed in by us, but rather to be

realized in us. In a startling midrash on the verse “You are my witnesses and I am God” God elaborates: “When you are my witnesses, I am God. When you are not my witnesses, I am, as it were, not God.” (Midrash Psalms)

I believe that God has chosen not to be all-powerful in our world. God has allowed nature to run its own course, and has given humanity free will. The sages of the Talmud understood God’s might – *Atah Gibbor l’olam Adonai* – As God’s great effort at self-restraint. In giving us humans complete freedom To act in this world. (Yoma 69b)

This means that the biblical mode of God meting out divine reward and punishment and intervening to save us from harm has been replaced by a natural system wherein actions have consequences, and accidents happen. The Talmud teaches that God suffers these things right along with us, and weeps for our pain. To hold God responsible for everything that happens, or to wish God was in control of the world, would require trading in human free will, and I think that is too high a price.

Even as we respond to the divine call from without, we respond also to the divine within. Rabbi Akiva said: God showed a great love by creating us in the divine image and an even greater love by letting us know it. Rabbi Arthur Green takes it a step further, teaching that we are not merely made in the image of God, but that we *are* the image of God.

Evil results when we ignore or reject the divine within. We have been left free to choose; if evil results, it is our problem to deal with, and our task to correct. The divine presence is a great light. When good is abundant, when humanity acts upon the divine, the light is more brightly revealed. When evil abounds, the light dims, and we must find our way out of the darkness. Yet God acts also as a guarantor that somehow we will find the way to light.

God said to Jacob: "Remember, I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go...I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Gn 28:15) God will not leave us

until the promise of redemption is fulfilled. Until then, we continue to work together to bring it.

Believing in God requires a leap of faith. Talking about it requires a heap of trust. Both take a measure of courage. I think back to that first time I was asked about God, and to Morgan's line "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?"

Now, having heard what I said, I know what I think, for the time being, at least. As I keep seeking, my beliefs may change. I have made the leap, and now I will continue leaping. I'll leap and I'll look, I'll question, and probe, and challenge, and then I'll leap again, trusting that the ground will be firm where I land. I'll keep listening to what I say, and, with God's help, know what I think.

I wish the same for you. In the new year may we be as Yisrael: ones who wrestle with God and prevail.