



Temple Rodef Shalom

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Many of you know my kids. They are just like any other kids here at the temple. Silly, cute, getting into trouble, annoyed with their mom at times... but one of my two daughters has a special interest – she is obsessed with questions about God. I know from many of you, that lots of kids are like this and you’ve probably heard many times the questions we are asked: Why does God makes sunflowers black and yellow? What does God do when it rains? And then my favorite...What does God smell like? The questions come daily in rapid fire. Kevin and I try to maintain our patience and come up with meaningful answers. Really we are thrilled that our child has a sense of and interest in God. I want to nurture this feeling because I know that it may not last. I know that there is a chance that she’ll join the portion of Jews who don’t believe in God.

Although 96% of Americans reportedly believe in God, I know that within the Jewish community that number is much smaller. I suspect that perhaps as few as 50% of us believe, maybe on a good day that might stretch to 60%. I’ve been told that many liberal Jews share the view of the well known science writer Lee Dembart. To paraphrase his words: God is just one more form of invented foolishness - like astrology, stock market predictions and faith healing that amount to nothing more than fairy tales.

Is he right? Is it true? Should I tell the hundreds of believing kids in our religious school that faith in God is just a childhood fairy tale? Could it be that we have come to Temple on this the supposed holiest day of the year and really it’s all a lot of nonsense?

For me, and for many of us here, it is not nonsense. God is real and, although our ideas about God may be very diverse, there are lots of us here who do believe.

Nevertheless, I am well aware that for others God – the idea, the belief, even simply the conversation is difficult. Most people find it easier to talk to their children about sex than about God. Many of us are plagued by what Abraham Joshua Heschel calls “religious bashfulness.” Talking about God and our beliefs is uncomfortable; we are unsure, embarrassed – we avoid these discussions at all costs. Kids don’t seem to have this problem, but we, adults have picked up this discomfort in the years that follow our early

religious school education. You know that time, when we began to sense that modern rational, sophisticated people – especially Jews – follow a theological policy best described as “don’t ask, don’t tell.” But, in the privacy of my office, when I ask people to tell me about the God they deny, it usually turns out that I deny that kind of God as well. I rejected the God who looks like an old man, with a white beard and long robe who controls the world, a long time ago. Most of us did. But then, unfortunately, few of us were ever given new models, new images or language of God that might have enabled us to stay connected to faith and belief. No one ever told us that it would be both acceptable and even Jewish to call God: Eternity, a Force or even the source of Love. Of course, we had no alternative but to reject our juvenile ideas. Add to this the fact that in time we all came to see the world for what is really it is – a harsh and unfair place – and, understandably, we had a recipe for atheism.

For so many, God, the word, the belief, gets in the way of making sense of the world. As Rabbi Janet Marder suggests: “Wouldn’t it be great if being Jewish were just about wonderful foods and warm, self-deprecating wit, a haimish sense of family, and a magnificent history of survival and a treasury of moral wisdom, and stirring calls for social justice? Now, that’s a religion you could really love!! But it isn’t just that, is it? Even though we sometimes pretend it is.” It’s something more. If we are honest about the whole picture we must acknowledge that God is at the heart of this tradition. And, as hard as it may be for each of us grown-up realists, who see the world with open eyes and don’t believe in fairy tales, today we are called to clarify our beliefs and come to terms with God. I know that many of you don’t believe in God and that others are unsure, ambivalent or even disinterested. I know because you have told me yourselves. But if you’d be so kind as to put your feelings aside for the next few minutes, you may find that you might actually be able to believe, just a little bit – maybe just in the G of God. And others, who struggle less with ideas of the Divine, might also find new connections and insights that strengthen and enhance your vision of God.

Actually, I think that many people really do want to believe. Isn’t that why some of us are here tonight? Yes, of course, some of us come for true worship and others are here out of obligation. But there is another reason why many of us come. We come because we are hoping to experience God’s presence here. Perhaps subconsciously,

perhaps secretly we come to Temple on these High Holy days hoping something extraordinary will happen and we'll be able to walk out of the synagogue seeing the world differently than we did when we walked in. We are looking for a glimpse of the Divine, just enough to give us faith, hope, belief.

I can relate to this feeling. I do believe in God, yet I too come each year with a deep hope that my beliefs will be strengthened, reaffirmed, enriched. I too want a glimpse of the God in whom I believe. I have felt God in my life – at some high points and some low points, but I don't live atop of a mountain, nor deep within a cave. Most of the time I exist at sea level and it is there, in my every day life, where I hope to meet the Divine.

The search for a sure belief in God has permeated our tradition since its beginning. We are not alone, of course, in our struggle. Throughout the centuries, Jewish philosophers and teachers have proposed different definitions for God. I imagine that some of these approaches capture the beliefs of many of you in this very room. Then again, I cannot even begin to share all of theologies that can be found in the broad spectrum of Jewish thought – so don't be discouraged if nothing sounds quite right to you because there are many more philosophies to consider.

During Biblical times, we Jews encountered God as a Creator, a Law Giver and a Judge. These beliefs are still strong in our tradition as so many of us feel God in nature or sense a connection to the Divine when we face decisions of right and wrong. The Torah often personifies God, bringing God close to us, engaged in the lives of individuals, controlling and shaping our experiences. To the rabbis of the Talmud, God is all-powerful, all-knowing, awesome and removed – a distant Force that directs the course of humanity with broad brush strokes. Other thinkers understand God to be everywhere at once, all spirit, and without beginning and end. They addressed God as Kadosh Barukh hu and understood that God's spirit lives within each and every one of us. Some of these ideas are mystical or secretive; some are based on reason and logic. Some of these ideas involve specific ways to connect with God, through song, dance, study, or prayer. I find no single definition totally sufficient. I revert to bits and pieces of many to make sense of the complexity of God. One may work for you or none of these or perhaps like me, your understandings have changed and grown over time. At one stage you believed, at another you did not, once God was personal, now God is distant. Where are you today?

In each generation, new thinking invites our beliefs to travel to new places. Of course, if we have already rejected all God beliefs it may be difficult to join this journey. But so many moments keep the door open for us to re-start the search – this day, Yom Kippur, a life changing event, a birth or an illness, an unexplained moment in nature, a new deep love. We are invited to explore our beliefs, to discover God as a noun or perhaps God as a verb. To look for a new name for God who is beyond all names.

Allow me to tell you about my own beliefs. It's easy to sum up a theology class from rabbinic school – but it's a lot harder to articulate personal thoughts on God. Nonetheless, I want to try. I want you to know what I believe. One of my strongest connections to God comes from a story in Book of Exodus. There Moses is struggling with that eternal problem of not being able to see God. He asks: "How you can expect me to believe in something I cannot see?" The response is a bit confusing. God says to Moses: "You cannot see my face, but you can see my back". What could this mean? Rabbi Harold Schulweiss has helped me to find my belief in God through his explanation of this verse. He says: "We can't see God but we can see God's after effects." God's Back is a way of saying that which comes after an encounter. What we can see of God is the difference that God makes as God passes through our lives. Maybe it's just like the wind. We can't see the wind; we can only see things being blown around by the wind.

In a way, we ought to be able to understand this concept better than previous generations could because of advances in (of all things...) science. No scientist has ever seen an electron. And as far as I know, no physicist has ever actually seen a quark. But they are absolutely convinced that quarks and electrons exist, because when they look through their microscopes, they see things happening that could only happen if quarks or electrons were real. That's what the Torah is saying about God. You and I can't see God, but we see things happening that could only be happening because God is at work.

I am privileged to experience God working in this way all the time. I recently officiated at a funeral for a family from out-of-town who do not belong to our congregation. I was warned in advance that the two sons of the deceased hadn't spoken to each other in many years. As the family sat down at the graveside, the child of the eldest son, a little girl of about four went to sit on the lap of her father. Inadvertently she went to her uncle whom she didn't know but looked just like her dad. When she realized she was

sitting on the wrong lap she simply said: “You look just like my daddy, and I bet you are just as nice. Can I love you too?” The two brothers were instantly drawn back to each other. They both started to cry, I believe, for their loss – not only of their father, but of their own relationship. It was an amazing moment, a moment where I witnessed God passing through human lives. Working imperceptibly, God’s presence made something happen, because certain things, like forgiveness and even love, do not always come naturally to people. Sometimes God comes in the form of forgiveness or love. Other times we can forgive and we can love when God stirs our souls.

Perhaps some of you have had moments like this? Can you recall some powerful or mysterious time when the sense of God’s presence passed before you? Remembering such moments can be joyful, it can also be painful, it can also be confusing. It is difficult to put words to those experiences. It is a challenge to invite these moments to inform and define our beliefs. Like so many of us here, I am drawn to concrete thinking. I like definitions. I am always trying to clarify issues. But I have come to see that it is impossible to define God. However it is possible to experience God. And through experience we develop our own personal beliefs. New experiences come all the time, and with them, new ways to think about God and our world. At the birth of a child, we understand God as life-giver. Standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, there is Force of nature that we know exists beyond all of us. Falling in love, we experience a Oneness that can unite humanity and helping others we hear an Eternal Voice calling for righteousness.

For me, transformative moments that have clarified my beliefs in God have happened mostly in the presence of other people. I do not believe that God is omnipotent, all powerful and involved in controlling this world. But I do believe that God has empowered us to bring the Divine qualities of love, care, justice and righteousness into the world through our actions. We are God’s instruments and we have the responsibility and power to access and actualize Divinity in the world.

So I don’t see God in the social action meeting but I do see God when we feed the hungry or rebuild the house. I feel God’s presence when members of our congregation go to a nursing home to lead services for the 3 Jewish residents that live there. I find God when members of this temple show up for a minyan at a mourners home in such large numbers that they standing in the kitchen and on the porch and in the hallways. Sure, one

can talk about God in such situations. Better to just be fully human, and let God be present simply because we are fulfilling our role as God's partner in making the world a better place. Do you think human kindness come from nowhere? I believe it comes from that Divine spark hidden within each of us. When we reach for goodness with other people reaching for goodness, those sparks unite and actually change the world. Call it whatever you want – I call it God.

I won't tell you that I never have doubts. I do. I regularly question my beliefs. I often face challenges that shake my faith. I am less sure some days than others. But, doubting and questioning are more than just accepted in our tradition, they are encouraged. When probed and explored, doubt comes to strengthen and clarify our faith. The fact that life is and always will be an enigma is no reason for despair but a challenge to our beliefs. After all, we are the people called Yisrael – those who struggle with God. Our name invites debate, critique and dialogue.

For many of us here, there is much with which to wrestle. God, the word, the belief, the call to action is very difficult. Still others are more sure and a few lucky individuals are firmly grounded and confident in their beliefs. I have not sorted all of this out for myself and there are many times when I live with challenging doubts. But I do believe.

I believe that there is a Force in this universe that is greater than me, greater than any of us. At its core, that Force, which I call God, contains the essence of love, justice and righteousness. The fact that the universe is constructed with beauty, order and ultimate coherence tells me so.

I believe that all living things are profoundly connected, that human beings are one family, endowed with infinite worth and entitled to lives of dignity – my experiences with God have taught me this.

I believe that God calls us to do justice and to love kindness; that our deeds have ultimate significance; and that we stand accountable for the lives we live.

I believe that, despite the abuses of religion, God summons forth the best in human beings and inspires us to reach for ultimate goals.

And I believe that none of this is a fairy tale. It is as real and important and powerful as anything I know. Ultimate purpose; ultimate meaning; ultimate significance; all of those are implied for me in the statement that God exists.

On these High Holy Days, Judaism invites us to open our minds and hearts to new beliefs in God that we can carry with us throughout the year. Might you be willing to accept this invitation? Could you imagine how God might fit into your life and bring more meaning, more comfort, perhaps greater clarity, to your daily existence? Would you consider shedding your religious bashfulness and sharing the beliefs you do have with someone else - your child, your partner, even another member of this congregation? I would like to hear your thoughts – they will surely nurture my own. Sharing my beliefs has been a powerful experience for me and I imagine it might be for you as well.

I'd like to conclude with a short story that I heard from a colleague. It tells of a boy flying a kite on a misty day; the kite was invisible in the fog. A passerby wondered what fun there could be in flying a kite that could not be seen. To which the boy replied: "I cannot see it but something is tugging." Most of us, trying to fathom the nature of our God, are flying kites in the fog. Many of our experiences are like the end of string: we do not see anything, but occasionally we sense that something is tugging. Here, at prayer with our people; or at home with our families – at the birth of a child, the death of a parent, listening to beautiful music, feeling the warmth and kindness of a friend or lover, standing alone by the ocean or under the stars – at these moments we sense a powerful mystery. Some of us call that mystery God. Through the haze of doubts and confusion, something is tugging. And today, of all days, we should pay attention.

Amen

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*With appreciation from Rabbi Janet Marder from her sermons: 'I Believe'
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