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Temple Kol Tikvah

IMAGES OF GOD ON ROSH HASHANAH

My father used to have a ditty which he quoted to our dog Peggy whenever she did something dumb—as dogs and also people are often wont to do. The ditty went like this, “When God passed out the brains, you thought He said trains and you missed yours.” O.K., I thought, I get it. God is the one who gives us brains before we are born, in other words, God creates us.

In the synagogue, particularly in the majesty of the High Holy Day liturgy, I learned that God is a great and magnificent king. I envisioned in my mind an elderly, white bearded medieval monarch, sitting high upon a throne, a bejeweled tiara upon his head, smiling and nodding down upon all of us benevolently. In one hand he held a golden scepter, and with the other hand, he gently caressed the head of one of the people or animals who had died and gone up to heaven.

But there seemed to be something missing. The final link was provided by television, by a commercial for Imperial Margarine. From that commercial I learned that there was someone named Mother Nature who, by the way, it wasn't nice to fool. O.K., now it all made sense to me: God and Mother Nature were married to each other and we, all the people and animals and living things of the world, were their children. When I had a bad stomach ache I would pray to God to make my stomach ache go away, and miraculously it did.

That image of the nature of God, culled from the resources available to me as a young child, was the one that I carried with me for many years. Is it any wonder then that as I became more mature in my intellectual reasoning powers my belief in God began to border upon agnosticism? Going through high school and college in the 1970's, when faded bumper stickers still proclaimed “God is Dead,” I had many more important things to think about than the nature of some allegedly dead monarch who lived in a faraway place high in the sky, with a wife who zapped with lightning naughty people who tried to fool her. A deity whose greatest power when I was a child was the ability to make my stomach aches go away. Fortunately, neither I, nor anyone close to me, had been “zapped” too badly, so the nature of God and his consort Mother Nature could, quite easily, take a back seat to other concerns.

But eventually, each of us gets zapped in some way. Whether it is through the death of someone close to us at much too young an age, an accident or illness faced by a loved one or ourselves, or just the daily grind of life seemingly out of control as so many of us have faced this past year, we find that we don't have the spiritual resources to support us, we can't even begin to grasp a notion of God that can help sustain us during our darkest hours.

Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, a Chassidic rebbe in the late 18th century, was concerned that his congregants tended to come to the synagogue only on

Rosh Hashanah, ignoring all the other times of prayer throughout the year. (Of course, some things never change!) One Rosh Hashanah evening, with the synagogue full, he told the story of a shopkeeper who lost his business in a fire. The man was distraught and shared his tale of woe with his friends at the local inn. What really concerned him was that he was indebted to a provider of raw materials—someone with whom he had done business for many years. The merchandise whose sale would have enabled him to pay the supplier had gone up in flames.

The shopkeeper's spouse advised him to tell his creditor exactly what had happened. Mustering up a great deal of courage, he made his way to the supplier's home, an exquisite villa on the edge of town. As he approached the front door, he broke into tears. He was unable to go further and sat down on the steps. Hearing the sound of sobs, the homeowner opened the door to see who was there—only to find his old friend and longtime customer hunched over in front of his house. He asked the shopkeeper why he was so upset and was told about the fire. He responded, "Don't you worry about what you owe me. I will forgive you the debt and even loan you some money in order to rebuild your business." Delighted, the shopkeeper returned to the inn to tell his friends of his good fortune.

A neighbor, not well-acquainted with the shopkeeper, overheard the story and reported it to his wife. In turn, his spouse coaxed him to approach the same individual, tell a similar story, and receive some funds. And that's exactly what he did. When the homeowner heard the noise on his steps and opened the door, he was surprised to find a stranger there. After hearing this stranger's fabricated story, he replied, "I do not know you. I do not have a relationship with you. The shopkeeper and I have done business for many years. We have been friends for a long time." And with those words, he threw the man off his property.

After telling the story, Levi Yitzchak said, "It is the same thing with God. We can't approach as strangers and expect God to do whatever we ask. Just as it takes time to develop a relationship with other humans, it takes time to develop one with God."¹

But how do we even begin to develop that relationship when bestselling books like Christopher Hitchens's *God is not Great* present only one understanding of God and religion. A very one dimensional, fundamentalist perspective that, at least with respect to Judaism, takes a snapshot of our religion developed 3,500 to 4,000 years ago, turns it into a black and white image, and completely ignores all of the richness and beauty of our tradition. At best I feel sorry for Hitchens, a man who clearly never matured intellectually with respect to religion beyond the boy of nine whom he writes about in his first chapter. Woe to the person who tries to rationalize a process of thought that is beyond rationalization; who approaches religion and God as a scientific theory to be debunked. Hitchens completely misses the deeper, more intellectually and

¹ As retold in *Jewish Spiritual Guidance: Finding Our Way to God* by Carol Ochs and Kerry M. Olitzky.

emotionally stimulating and inspiring messages imbedded in religious stories both ancient and new.

If the past year of misfortune for so many people has taught us one thing, it is as noted in the business section of last Sunday's *New York Times*, "Economists assume people are rational. They aren't."² When Hitchens recounts his own personal intellectual journey toward a secular view of life based purely on science and reason, I am reminded of Germany in the 1920's—the center of intellectual reason and rationalism, of Western philosophical thought. We all know how that story played out. Believing in an absolute truth with a capital "T" is a dangerous concept, whether it is coming from a place of absolute belief for or against religious models. Every religion holds within its core competing, often diametrically opposed claims and beliefs. Those who declare otherwise, whether believers or non-believers, are fundamentalists.

Yet, as a non-fundamentalist for whom God and spiritual care is an important component of my life, let me ask you: How can it be so terrible to tap into a belief in something greater than ourselves? To believe that we have a greater purpose as human beings than to make money, buy material goods and consume them? To be able to access a belief, in our deepest, darkest moments of life that we are not completely alone. These are the meanings that my religious belief seeks to address. My God does not represent truth with a capital "T", my God is simply my truth, with a small "t," developed out of generations of our people's wisdom that continues flowering to this day and it is what each of us needs to seek for ourselves.

One of my favorite books is called *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew* by Rabbi Neil Gillman. In the introduction to his book, Gillman notes that for some Jews today, and I would add for most Reform Jews today "the received tradition is no longer self-validating,...it has to be rethought, reformulated, stretched anew."³ As Gillman notes the new individualism, historical awareness and critical temper of our time have done their work, irreparably shattering "the traditional set of images that characterized Judaism from antiquity on."⁴ He asserts that "we have to carve out our own new set of tablets. But we also know that we can never discard the fragments of the old, however inadequate they may seem to us. To do so would be to lose our link with our community—and without a community, where and who would we be?" He reflects, "In fact, an extended modern homily on both the biblical verse and its rabbinic interpretation might teach that we must refashion our new tablets precisely out of the fragments of the old." The book provides a survey of Jewish thought from the biblical era through contemporary times so that each of us might fashion a *midrash*, a story, of our own reflecting our individual concept of God, drawn from the fragments of generations of Jewish thought.

² "Flow in Free Markets: Humans," by Robert H. Frank in *The New York Times*, Sunday September 13, 2009, Sunday Business page 4.

³ *Sacred Fragments: Recovering Theology for the Modern Jew*, Neil Gillman, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990, pg. xxiii.

⁴ *Ibid*, pg. xxv

In 1990, my colleague Rabbi Margaret Wenig created quite a stir with her Rosh Hashanah sermon to her congregation. Entitled “God Is A Woman and She Is Growing Older,” Wenig gained a measure of fame, although some say notoriety with her portrayal of the deity as a loving, long-suffering and aging mother who wonders why we haven’t called. In an interview a number of years ago she noted, “the images [in the sermon] really come from two sources: from real women that I have known, but also from the Bible and Rabbinic literature and the liturgy. I spent one season preparing for Rosh Hashanah reading the four hundred pages of our high holiday prayer book in search of images of God, and the sermon...is almost a string of quotations from the liturgy which itself is quoting from the Bible.”⁵

She begins her imagery, “God is a woman and she is growing older. She moves more slowly now. She cannot stand erect. Her face is lined. Her voice is scratchy. Sometimes she has to strain to hear. God is a woman and she is growing older; yet, she remembers everything.

On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the day on which she gave birth to us, God sits down at her kitchen table, opens the Book of Memories, and begins turning the pages; and God remembers.”⁶

It is one of the most stunning metaphors of God that I have ever read, and each year I return to it as part of my preparation for the High Holy Days. This year, we have made copies of the sermon and placed them on the information table in the lobby. Please feel free to pick up a copy over the course of these High Holy Days, or if you prefer, e-mail me and I will send a copy to you.

As Arriela Pelaia notes, Wenig’s image certainly isn’t traditional but it is thought-provoking. It “drives home the idea of our personal responsibility to seek out God if we hope to cultivate a spiritual relationship with the divine.”⁷ Pelaia goes on to reminisce about a class that she “took with Rabbi Neil Gillman [author of Sacred Fragments] at the Jewish Theological Seminary... where he asked participants to create a personal metaphor for God. Some described God as a breeze that couldn’t be seen or touched but could be felt. Others described God as a dance partner that sometimes left you standing on the dance floor, wondering why you were all alone. The metaphors were endlessly unique, each reflecting how that person conceptualized their relationship with the divine.” She says that listening to other people’s metaphors was just as profound as coming up with [her] own.”⁸

A number of years ago I met a man who told me a story. One day, when his son was five or six years old he took him to meet the rabbi. Looking up at the rabbi, the boy asked, “What does God look like?” The rabbi asked, “Can I pick you up?” And the boy replied, “Yes.” With that, the rabbi swept the boy off his

⁵ Interview with Margaret Wenig, interviewed by Lydia Talbot on “30 Good Minutes,” a weekly ecumenical and interfaith program on WTTW 11 (PBS) Chicago. First airdate Feb. 23, 1997. Reprinted at http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Wenig_4025.htm

⁶ “God is a Woman and She is Growing Older” by Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig as reprinted at http://www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Wenig_4025.htm

⁷ Arriela Pelaia, “Ariela’s Judaism Blog,” About.com Guide to Judaism.

<http://judaism.about.com/b/2009/09/01/god-is-a-woman-she-is-growing-older.htm>

⁸ Ibid

feet and whirled him around and around. As he placed the laughing child back on the floor he asked him, "Did you feel the wind as I swung you around." The boy replied, "Yes." The rabbi then asked, "What does the wind look like?"

The boy looked at the rabbi quizzically, and the rabbi continued, "God is like the wind. We can feel God's presence all around us, but God is invisible, just like the wind."

Let's not sell our children or ourselves short with traditional images that might not speak to them or to us. This High Holy Day season I want to challenge this congregation to not just intone the words in the prayerbook that talk about God, but to find the meaning of God in each of your own lives. Granted, I realize that this line of inquiry might be uncomfortable for some, if not most of you. After all, this is not something that for many years was considered appropriate to discuss in "polite" company, especially in "polite" Reform Jewish circles. But this past year has been a year of fear, trauma and struggle for many in our community. A time in which many of you are looking for meaning and answers for which rationalism and science don't provide.

In addition to Rabbi Wenig's sermon that can be found in the lobby, we have placed on every two or three chairs this evening a half sheet of paper with three recommended books to begin your inquiry. These ten days of the High Holy Days are traditionally a period of reflection and introspection. Take a little bit of time out of each day to turn inward and upward, to use this period of time as it has been intended for generations.

As this new year of 5770 dawns, I continue to believe that Judaism contains truths that can help to guide each and every one of us through life and that people like Christopher Hitchens completely misunderstand and miss the point of a healthy, non-fundamentalist religious identity. But trust me, it takes a lot of work to develop and maintain a relationship with God. It begins with the struggle to cast away long held beliefs that God and Judaism belong in a small box tucked away in a corner somewhere with all of the debris of our childhoods. It continues with realizing that it is o.k. as thinking, intellectually mature adults to believe in God, to question God and to talk about God in polite company. I invite you to begin the journey tonight and continue the journey for a lifetime.