

A Jewish businessman was in a great deal of trouble. His business was failing, he had put everything he had into it, and he owed everybody. It was so bad he was even contemplating suicide. Looking to his Jewish heritage for guidance, he went to see his rabbi to whom he poured out his story of tears and woe.

When he had finished, the Rabbi said, "Here's what I want you to do: drive down to the beach. Take a beach chair and your Torah commentary with you. When you get to the beach, take the beach chair and the Torah commentary to the water's edge, sit down in the chair, and put the Torah in your lap. Open it and let the God-driven wind flip through the pages. Soon the Torah commentary will come to rest on a page. Look down at the page and read the first thing you see. That will be your answer. That will tell you what to do."

A year later the businessman went back to the Rabbi and brought his wife and children with him. The man was wearing a new custom-tailored suit, his wife was flashing a large, sparkling diamond ring; their children were shining. The businessman pulled an envelope stuffed with money out of his pocket and gave it to the Rabbi as a donation in thanks for his advice.

The Rabbi recognized the benefactor and was curious. "You did as I suggested?" he asked. "Absolutely," replied the businessman. "You went to the beach?" "Absolutely."  
"You sat in a beach chair with the Torah commentary in your lap?" "Absolutely."  
"You let the pages flip in the wind until they stopped?" "Absolutely." "And what were the first words you saw?"  
"Chapter 11."

I like this joke. But it's not how I dispense rabbinic advice. When a distressed person comes to see me I choose specific texts that I think might provide guidance and inspiration. The Torah, the prophets, the lessons of *Pirke Avot*—the Wisdom of our Ancestors—Talmudic and Hasidic texts contain valuable wisdom. Often times, we just need to be willing to receive these sacred texts and acknowledge that they can guide us. What might be more difficult for some to recognize is that these texts, sources of wisdom, are divinely inspired.

Sacred texts can teach us, influence us, and guide us. They help us through birth and death, *simcha* and sorrow. All of these texts contain a spark of the Divine. Sometimes the texts are the words of God specifically addressed to Abraham,

Isaac, Jacob or Moses as recounted in the Torah. Often the texts are infused with God-inspired language or values—written by sages who believed without doubt that God exists and who believed that God has a purpose for us in this world.

Do we share our ancient rabbis' faith? Do we see God's imprint when we examine the texts of our tradition?

I do. I believe that God exists and is present in my life and in the life of our community. I believe that our core Jewish values contain God's imprint. I believe, as Dr. Eugene Borowitz has taught, that God wants us to act in Godlike ways as defined in Torah and throughout Jewish tradition. I believe that *mitzvot*—a Jew's divinely inspired obligations—should guide our actions. I believe that the texts we study are sacred and inspired, if not written literally by God.

I know that many in our congregation do not share my belief in God's existence and struggle continually with the idea of God. They're skeptical and uncertain. They question, probe and debate. They behave. . .like Jews.

“How can you prove that God exists?” they might ask. Or, “What kind of God takes the lives of children, or causes natural disasters?” “Why does God reward the sinners while punishing the pious?” “Why did God allow six million Jews to perish in the Holocaust? If God exists, where was he?” Many liberal Jews have difficulty affirming a belief in God. Some are Atheists—they reject a belief in God as strongly as I affirm it. Some Atheists believe that God is a concept that people made up and that religion is the source of the brutal violence that has been perpetrated in the name of a religion's God.

Recently critics of religion have become more vocal. In the past year especially, we've seen a parade of strident attacks against belief and faith. Three popular books have forcefully challenged God, religion and people of faith. Some of these authors have gloated in the recent revelation that Mother Theresa endured a private, painful, decades-long crisis of faith during her ministry to Calcutta's poor.

Despite these challenges to our faith, Americans still maintain a strong belief in God. A Harris Poll issued last year revealed that 76% of Protestants, 64% of Catholics and a whopping 92% of Evangelical Protestants are “absolutely certain” that there is a God. What about us? When asked the same question, only 30% of Jews said that they were “absolutely certain” that there was a God. Why is the response of an American Jew so often different from a Christian's response? Perhaps it is because the question is asked in absolute terms and Jews take a nuanced view of the question. Jews express a belief in God that is different from Gentiles'. For example, Jews don't *believe* in order to be *saved*. Belief and faith often inspire us to do; to work, not to save the soul, but rather to save the world, one small act at a time.

Religion, faith, God and belief are manifest in our world today in radically different forms. A rise in religious fundamentalism has turned many liberal people of faith away from their religion, away from God.

My humble task this morning is to offer some different ways of thinking broadly about the affirming role that faith and belief in God can play in our lives, from a modern and enlightened perspective. This is important should we desire to explore any number of the traditional Jewish pathways to God. After all, the liturgy of this Yom Kippur service is filled almost entirely with affirmations and proclamations of God. Why not find a way to discuss matters of faith, belief and God in an inclusive and non-threatening manner? Or, if you truly don't believe in any form of a God-idea, what brings you to synagogue on the holiest day of the year, when you just can't escape from God? You're certainly not here for the Oneg pastries.

There are active, shul-going Jews who probably struggle with this dichotomy. They come to temple but don't believe in God. It's like that punch line of the joke—Cohen comes to shul to talk to God, Goldberg comes to shul to talk to Cohen. For liberal Jews, an expressed belief in God is not a prerequisite for participation. But some wonder if their belief is being judged. One person even questioned whether she could be a good Jew if she didn't believe in God. After a lengthy conversation, I am not convinced that this person is truly an Atheist; she doubts, and she does ask questions that many ask frequently. But I think she might have room for the possibility of God.

As we know, probing questions about atheism are certainly trendy. In the past year a secular trinity of sorts has come out swinging at God and those who believe in God.

Sam Harris' "Letter to a Christian Nation," Richard Dawkins', "The God Delusion" and Christopher Hitchens', "God is Not Great," have all sold very well. Each writer attacks, appropriately so, the frauds and fanatics who, in truth, sully the religious denominations they claim to represent. And each makes a distinct argument. Dawkins focuses on Darwinian evolution to disprove the existence of God. Hitchens tends to attack the people who believe in God. He takes them to task for holding onto an idea that might have served a purpose centuries ago when we knew far less than we do today. He looks at religion as the source of some of the world's blight rather than the source of great ideas and values.

Hitchens writes, "God did not create man in his own image. Evidently it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization."<sup>1</sup> Sam Harris in

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hitchens; *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* p. 8

“Letter to a Christian Nation” mocks Christian conservatives for opposing abortion. He writes, “It has been estimated that fifty percent of all human conceptions end in spontaneous abortion, usually without a woman ever realizing that she was pregnant. In fact twenty percent of all recognized pregnancies end in miscarriage. There is an obvious truth here that cries out for acknowledgement: If God exists, He is the most prolific abortionist of all.”<sup>2</sup> These brief examples expose us to the mind-set of Atheist ideologues. I find it interesting that the opinions of these three authors in particular are so strong that they seem to embody a zeal for Atheism that is just as intolerant as the manifestations of religious fundamentalism they decry. They are angry and smug, a terrible combination. Yes, religious fundamentalists have been responsible for some of our history’s greatest atrocities, but so have many Atheists, such as Josef Stalin and Pol Pot.

What these authors fail to recognize are the benefits of an abiding faith inspired by the Divine that helps to improve our world. An Atheist may look at community service through a strictly secular and civic lens. But Jews, at least, view this as a form of *Tikkun Olam*, a sacred act of repairing the world. Some may even look at the mystical dimension of *Tikkun* that inspires us to collect the shattered pieces of our world, all of which contain a spark of the Divine, a holy eminence, and piece by piece make it whole once again.

These authors point to the way some religious leaders abuse their positions. These transgressions are reprehensible. But these authors fail to see how religious leaders and organizations inspire and galvanize their members to serve the poor, needy and disenfranchised in our community. Three weeks ago, we observed the two-year anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. Most journalists remarked at the tremendous efforts of church groups that had sent busload after busload of volunteers to help clean up and repair the devastated Gulf Coast. Remember, it was a group of forty Jews and Christians, including four of us from Temple Beth El, that traveled to Gulfport, Mississippi, under the auspices of the Board of Rabbis and the AME Church to work with a Presbyterian relief organization in Gulfport. If this doesn’t demonstrate the high ideals of “Judeo-Christian” values, then what does it show?

People of faith have the right and responsibility to take to task those who pervert the essence of their faith. But to denigrate our faith, our belief, our sense of religiously inspired mission or purpose is just plain offensive.

Yet I’m not too worried about these authors. Despite the volleys launched by Harris, Hitchens and Dawkins, I think that liberal Jews will read their works differently. We are, after all, a people who are accustomed to questioning. We

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<sup>2</sup> Sam Harris; *Letter to a Christian Nation* p. 38

don't believe in something just because someone tells us we should. Our personal faith develops from our own experiences of discerning the presence of the Divine in our world. I believe that if asked in a different way, most of us would identify ourselves as people of faith and that most of us believe in God, or a divine presence, or a God-idea. We believe in God as we define God for ourselves, and our belief may wax and wane over time. We are modern people accustomed to questioning God.

We might not be, as the Harris poll asked, "absolutely certain" but rather, "fairly certain" that God exists. It is part of our makeup to question, consider, explore questions of faith and belief. We don't make a statement of belief blindly; we do so with great consideration and trepidation.

We've been doing so since the time of Benedict Spinoza. He was the medieval Jewish philosopher best known for being excommunicated in 1656 from his Portuguese-Jewish congregation in Amsterdam because he publicly doubted the existence of God. He believed in nature and ethics, was influenced by Descartes and was in ideological harmony with Hobbes. As Rebecca Goldstein has noted in a recent biography, he was "the first serious thinker to opt for secularism when the concept had not yet been formulated."<sup>3</sup> He was the first serious Jewish thinker to refuse to accept at face value the idea that God exists and is present in the world.

Since Spinoza, and before, Jewish philosophers have explored the nature of God. Is God real and present in our lives? Is God immanent—close, personal, inside each of us? Is God transcendent—distant and disinterested in involving himself in the affairs of people? Are there periods when God withdraws from humankind, to let us praise or profane God's name without interfering? These are important questions that thoughtful Jews ask and that we take time to debate and explore.

A Jewish approach to faith and belief is different than a Christian approach. That may be why there was such a discrepancy in the Harris Poll. For many Christians, their belief in God is a prerequisite for salvation. Jews don't have this problem. We're not put on this earth in order to be saved, to go to the pearly gates of heaven or avoid the rings of hell. We are here to live by the teachings of our Torah and our tradition, which, I believe, are divinely inspired. Whether we believe or not is secondary. As long as we do good works, and God's work as taught by our tradition, for the benefit of humankind, we fulfill our purpose on earth. It just so happens that I and other religious Jews believe this is God's will, even if some don't.

Many Jews aren't certain about their belief. They may, as Professor Vanessa Ochs has observed, "believe in a greater God (whom they may call God) who leads them to discover that life is meaningful, who goads them to study healing,

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<sup>3</sup> Rebecca Goldstein; *Betraying Spinoza* p. 4

who persuades them that love can undo despair. Not precisely ‘belief in God’ that the pollsters are measuring, but not full-out disbelief either.”<sup>4</sup> Some may feel as one of our congregants does that she doesn’t believe in God, but really, really wants to.<sup>5</sup> Or as Elie Wiesel has written, “A Jew can love God or hate God, but a Jew cannot ignore God.”

Judaism provides a great idea that many of us may not realize exists. That idea is a number of distinct pathways to God. A book that I assign to all of my conversion students, a book that I recommend to you as well, is called “Finding God: Ten Jewish Responses.” The authors of this book, two Reform rabbis, provide a beginner’s guide to a spectrum of Jewish theologies by exploring different and often contradictory theological ideas. The book explores the range of opinion within Judaism and shows that we can develop belief by taking a path that is right for us. When we do that, we discover, discern and eventually own that path for ourselves.

Two and a half years ago, I was asked many questions during my interview. One of my favorites was this: “If a child asks, what does God look like, what would you say?” My response reflected my own theology: “Hold up a mirror and look into it. Then you’ll see God.” Apparently my response secured the vote of at least the person who asked it.

This I believe. There is a part of God within each of us. We act in the way God wants us to, by living according to the highest ethical standards, by taking care of the needy in our community, by living according to the *mitzvot*, our sacred obligations. We do so in a manner that is meaningful, relevant, and done with integrity. By doing so we fulfill the divine purpose for which God created us. This may resonate with some and not with others. If it doesn’t, I would encourage you to read, study, explore. Find a Jewish understanding of God that closely aligns with those beliefs that are most important to you.

Throughout Yom Kippur, the language of God will bombard us. This language might be appealing to you or appalling. We may resonate with anthropomorphic imagery of God, or look for different descriptions. The bottom line is that, if we remain in the sanctuary today, we can’t avoid God no matter how hard we try. So we will confront God.

We’ll be inspired by the message of this morning’s *parashah*, where God, through Moses, encourages the Israelites, saying, “These commandments are not too difficult for you, they’re not out of reach, you can do it, you can observe them.” Or the verses from Leviticus that we’ll read this afternoon which articulate a system of ethics and behavior that inspires and influences all decent people to this day. These too, are divinely inspired words. We’ll confess our sins to God, and

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<sup>4</sup> Vanessa Ochs in an article “Do We Believe”; *World Jewish Digest*, September 2007

<sup>5</sup> From a d’var Torah by Linda Belzer, July 2006

God will forgive us. As we proceed through this most solemn day, may we wrestle with God, may we inquire of God, and may we consider God. May God be present in our midst. Even if we think we don't believe in God, may we open ourselves to the real possibility that God exists, and is here, with us, in this sanctuary and in our prayers. And if you are still unsure, just take a moment and look in a mirror. Then you'll see God.

Amen