

Entering Into Relationship With God

Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev once summoned all of the Jews of his community to assemble in the town square the following day at noon, because he had to make an announcement of the utmost importance. He ordered that all the merchants were to close their shops, that all nursing mothers were to bring their infants, and that everyone, with no exceptions, was to be there to hear the announcement. The people wondered what the announcement could be. Was a pogrom imminent or a new tax? Was the Rabbi going to leave? Or was he perhaps seriously ill? Did he know the time when the Messiah would come and was he going to reveal it? At noon the entire community was present, and everyone waited with bated breath to hear what the rabbi would announce. Precisely at twelve the Rabbi rose and said: "I, Levi Yitzhak, son of Sarah, have gathered you here today in order to tell you that...*there is a God in the world.*"

At first the people were perplexed. Was *this* the big announcement that they had left their homes and closed their shops to hear? Had the Rabbi convened them only to tell them something that every school child already knew? But then, as they thought about it, they began to say to themselves: "Indeed what could be more important than to know that there is a God in the world?" (Rabbi Harold Kushner, *The World of the High Holidays*, Vol 1., p. 83)

For anyone who has seen the iphone commercials, you know that if you can imagine something cool you'd like your phone to do, "there's an App for that." There are Apps for everything these days, so I shouldn't have been surprised when I read the NY Times article by Paul Vitello (7/2/10) describing a number of Apps that have been created for "believers" and "non-believers" alike to help each group "prove" their perspective concerning the existence or non-existence of God.

Let's take a moment to focus on the "non-believers" who seek to disprove Rabbi Levi Yitzhak's claim and suggest further that the world would be better off without religion entirely. Although I have not studied these claims exhaustively, it seems there are two major claims when it comes to atheism: 1) we cannot prove that God exists, but we can disprove theories of God's existence. 2) Religion has caused more harm than good throughout the centuries, and therefore should be abandoned for the higher pursuit of science.

To address the second claim is simpler. We all can acknowledge that while it is certainly true that religion can be manipulated and used in harmful and dangerous ways, it seems equally true that religion can be used for a great deal of good.

But it is the first claim, the one that tries to “disprove” the existence of God with which I have the most trouble. In my mind, the whole notion of “**disproving**” God’s existence lies at the heart of the problem. The term “proof” often implies something being based in scientific fact; something that can be measured on some type of empirical level. When Richard Dawkins wrote his popular book, “The God Delusion,” he wrote: *‘the presence or absence of a creative super-intelligence is unequivocally a scientific question.’*” It is this type of thinking that I find to be the most problematic. When Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev made the announcement that *There is a God in this world*, he was speaking the language of **belief and not science**. My biggest fault with most proponents of atheism who claim to be sure that God does not exist is that they are confusing science with religion. While both science and religion can and should complement one another, they must not be confused with one another.

And I do not want to pick on non-believers alone. When it comes to faith and belief, we cannot *prove* that God exists, any more than we can *prove* that God does not exist. To do so in either direction is much too simplistic and fundamentalist.

When I read that people are using the new iPhone Apps to prove or disprove God’s existence, I am somewhat amused, but also find myself feeling sad and curious. *Amused*, because “what will they think of next”; *Sad* because belief in God brings such joy, meaning, and purpose into my own life; and, *Curious* because I wonder if people making these kinds of claims are really “atheists” or simply don’t believe in an omnipotent and omniscient God. You know, the God from our childhoods. The One with the long beard, who answers everyone’s prayers, punishes the sinners, rewards the righteous, makes no mistakes, and has control over the events of our lives. To tell you the truth, I don’t believe in that God either- but I am certainly not an atheist! There is a wonderful story told by Rabbi Irwin Kula where he describes a conversation that he had with Nobel Prize winning physicist Murray Gell-Mann. When Gell-Mann was introduced to Rabbi Kula at a dinner party, he said: “Rabbi, I am a scientist. I must tell you upfront I don’t believe in God.” Kula replied as he always does in such situations by saying: “That’s okay. I don’t believe in the God you don’t believe in either.”

The truth is that there are many different understandings of God in Judaism. Jewish belief starts with the premise that there is One God. But the way in

which we understand and describe that God is multi-faceted. As Rabbi Neil Gillman teaches, “we discover God and invent the metaphors to describe that experience.” Kula puts it slightly differently saying:

All descriptions of God are projections-sacred projections. The question is, what images do we use to express the yearning? Definitions of God should never be confused with God any more than the description of an orange can capture the taste of an orange. (Kula, *Yearnings*, 16)

Let’s take these High Holidays as one example. The central way in which we describe God during these days is by using the metaphor of God as a Ruler who is all-knowing, all powerful, compassionate, and forgiving. While we may cling to the image of God as compassionate & forgiving, many people struggle with the all-powerful, all-knowing parts of this metaphor- and that’s okay. In fact, struggling lies at the heart of who we are as a people. It’s in our name: *Yisrael*- literally, one who wrestles with God. Throughout all of our sacred texts God is described in hundreds of different ways. God is described as a Shepherd and God is described as a Man of War. God is on High, and God is described as Close to those who call. God is described as Punishing and God is described as Forgiving. God is described as One who seeks us out, and God is described as hiding. God is described as a protecting and sheltering presence and God is described as being asleep on the job. And since that last one is in the Bible (Psalm 44) we can rest assured that we are not alone in our struggles to understand God’s ways. In fact, this struggle is highlighted each time we read the words of Psalm 27 that are traditionally recited every day from the beginning of Elul through Yom Kippur.

The author of this Psalm claims to be “steadfast in his faith” and yet he continually uses language to express feelings of despair and a hopeful yearning that God is indeed listening and will play a role in his life.

שְׁמַע־ה' קוֹלִי אֶקְרָא וְחַנּוּנִי וְעֲנֵנִי:
לָדָּ | אֲמַר לְבִי בִקְשׁוּ פָנַי אֶת־פָּנֶיךָ ה' אֲבַקֶּשׁ:

Adonai, hear my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer.
It is You whom I seek, says my heart.
It is Your presence that I seek, Adonai.

אֶל־תִּסְתֵּר פָּנֶיךָ | מִמֶּנִּי אֶל־תֵּט בְּאָף לַעֲבֹדָךְ
עֲזַרְתִּי הָיִיתָ אֶל־תִּטְשֵׁנִי וְאֶל־תִּעֲזֹבֵנִי אֵל־לֹהִי יִשְׁעִי:

Do not hide from me; do not reject Your servant.
You have always been my help; do not abandon me.
Forsake me not, my God of deliverance...

קוֹה אֱלֹהֵי הַיְיָ לִבִּי וְיִצְמַח לִי צִדִּיק וְיִקְוֶה אֱלֹהֵי

Hope in Adonai.
Be strong, take courage, and hope in Adonai.

From the authors of all of our sacred texts, to modern day religious leaders, many faithful people throughout the ages have struggled with their belief in God, but somehow they manage to hold out hope.

Everyone struggles with God. I struggle with God just as much as the next person, and like all of you, I don't have an answer to some of the most challenging existential questions like why bad things happen to good people. It is not as if clergy members have any more of a direct connection to God than anyone else. It is whether or not we *choose to struggle*, that is the key. If we give up on God without even searching, then there is very little chance that God will mean anything to us in our lives.

So where do we look? You might think that I would say "everywhere," but actually my teacher Rabbi Steven Brown once taught me that the explanation of God is everywhere is not always so helpful. He suggested that God is "*when*" not "*where*." In other words God *can* be found in all of the moments of our lives. But again, God can only be found there if we are willing to let God in. In one of my favorite teachings, the Kotzker Rebbe asks his students: "Where is God? God is wherever you let God in."

Notice the emphasis in the words of Psalm 27: "It is you that **I seek**, says my heart. It is your presence that **I seek**, Adonai." God can only be found, and we can only enter into a relationship with God, if we are willing to look.

Elie Wiesel tells the following story about Rabbi Barukh of Medzebozh:

Rebbe Barukh's grandson, Yehiel came running into his study, all in tears.

Yehiel, Yehiel, why are you crying?" asked Rebbe Barukh.

"My friend cheats! It's unfair; he left me all by myself. That's why I am crying."

"Would you like to tell me about it?" asked Rebbe Barukh.

"Certainly Grandfather. We played hide-and-seek, and it was my turn to hide and his turn to look for me. But I hid so well that he couldn't find me. So he gave up; he stopped looking. And that's unfair."

Rebbe Barukh began to caress Yehiel's face, and tears welled up in his eyes. God too, Yehiel." He whispered softly, "God too is unhappy; God is hiding and people are not looking for God. Do you understand Yehiel? God is hiding and we, our people, are not even searching..."
(adapted from Four Hasidic Masters, 52-53)

Why does it often seem like God is hiding? I don't know. But we can only find God in this world, and in our lives if we go looking carefully, paying very close attention to the details and holiness hidden in the day-to-day blessings of living. It is often easier to find God during moments of pain, danger, extreme joy; or when we are witness to the overwhelming beauty of God's creation. When a child is born, or when we are standing before the Grand Canyon. Right before entering that life threatening surgery- God does not seem to be so hidden.

Or during some moments that come once a year, like Kol Nidrei or Neilah- our sense of God's presence may be heightened. But when it comes to our everyday, busy lives, we often seem to get stuck. After all, we are running from here to there, eating on the go, hearing bells and alarms go off all over the place- is it our cell phone, or our e-mail? What appointment do we have next? Life can be very hectic. Paying attention to the details of our own schedules is hard enough. How are we ever going to pay close enough attention to the details in our lives in order to enter into a relationship with God? Like any other challenging skill, it takes much patience and practice.

Let's take a few examples. How many times do we stop and recognize that the simple act of waking up each morning is a miracle? How many times do we stop and realize that the fact that we can go to the bathroom when necessary is a blessing? And how many of us really stop to see that God can be found in many of our relationships with friends, family, and loved ones? What about the fact that most of us live in comfortable houses with health, jobs and financial stability? And even for those of us who have faced periods without these comforts that most of us take for granted, God's presence is felt in the realization that there are sometimes powers beyond our control in life. There is science, free will, and our hard work at play in many of these blessings and struggles. But hidden beneath the surface of each of those things is God's presence. We simply don't always make the time to look.

But looking for God is what Judaism is all about. Judaism is about making the ordinary moments of life “extraordinary” by discovering God’s presence in every moment. This is extremely challenging. Who has time to remember to look for God? The rabbis understood this. That is why we have so much fixed liturgy and why our tradition teaches that we should recite one hundred berakhot each day. The words are there precisely to sensitize us to God’s presence in our lives. When we wake up, we say a berakha. When we go to the bathroom, we say a berakha. When we see someone we haven’t seen in a long time, we say a berakha. When we see the ocean or lightening we are taught to say berakhot. The berakhot are like stop signs that force us to take notice of God amongst the jumble of details that crowd our daily lives.

Again, although there is only One God, we may discover different aspects of God depending on where we are looking, and what we are experiencing in that moment. God may feel very close, like a parent, or very far like a ruler. We acknowledge this each time we recite the *Avinu Malkeynu* describing God at once as both a parent and a ruler. Discovering, let alone connecting with God, is no simple task. There is no simple resolution to making God a part of our lives. As my teacher Rabbi Gillman taught me, the challenge is that the tension *is* the resolution. Amidst struggling and searching we discover God. But as one name for God reminds us, we have to be willing to look. *Karov Adonai L’kol Korav*- God is only close to us if we call on God. So this Yom Kippur, I want you to entertain one question: Where and when might you find God in your life? And then go look. Look closely at your every day surroundings, at your health, at your job, at your family and friends, and especially at yourself. Allow yourself to explore the idea that while God is One, God can be understood in many different ways. As Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev taught: There is a God in this world. And that God is waiting to be found by each one of us.

I wish everyone a *Gmar Hatimah Tovah*, May each One of us be sealed in the Book of Life.