

Bringing God Back Into Judaism

As the old joke goes, Goldberg and Schwartz are heading down the road when they run into another man. “Where are you going?” asks the man. “We’re headed to the synagogue,” they both respond. “I see why Goldberg, goes to synagogue,” the man says. Goldberg believes in God. But Schwartz, you don’t believe in God, why are you going? Goldberg goes to talk to God, but I go to talk to Goldberg.

I would imagine that many of you are like Schwartz and here to talk to Goldberg... and that’s ok. But this morning I don’t just want to talk to God, I want to talk about God.

I’ll start with the disclaimer that I think it’s a trivial task to try and prove God’s existence as if talking about God was in the realm of science and mathematics. Theology, thinking about God, is something entirely different. Even if I were to teach about the various philosophical arguments for the existence of God— the Cosmological argument, the

Ontological Argument, or the Teleological argument —I'm pretty sure no one would walk away feeling more spiritual or deeply connected.

These arguments are trying to explain the Divine with rational thinking.

Yet that's not how or why people form a connection to God. The realm of theology isn't irrational, but rather non-rational. That is to say people of faith aren't concerned with the rationality of their beliefs; it's a different way of thinking altogether. It's about feeling, connection, and emotion.

I want to talk about God, because God isn't so much a part of our everyday conversations, even though perhaps it should be. Judaism has become so much less focused on God amidst our fixation on culture, history, and community, that we should return for at least one conversation about God these High Holidays.

We've been reading all morning about God. God the creator, God the arbiter, God the healer, the giver of Torah, God who loves us, God who is one. It should seem natural that we might talk about God, even if you

struggle with the idea of God, even if you're like our friend Schwartz. I have a theory about what may have happened to Schwartz, and probably to many of you. You were told when you were young about this guy called God. God was probably, a man, hanging out in the clouds with a white beard. He may have even bore a striking resemblance to Zeus. And you were told that God was all-powerful, all-knowing, and all good. And that sounded pretty fantastical, and for an innocent child, believable. Then the realities of our lives disconnect us from our childhood beliefs about God. To borrow a term from, Eliana Light, a Jewish educator in New York, a "God Gap" forms. ¹

This God Gap often happens at moments of suffering or loss in our life. When a family member succumbs to cancer, when an infant child tragically dies from Sudden Infant Death syndrome. When life feels broken with no repair in sight. We struggle to reconcile our beliefs of God from the traumas that we suffer, and with the brokenness that we

¹ <https://elitalks.org/god-gap>

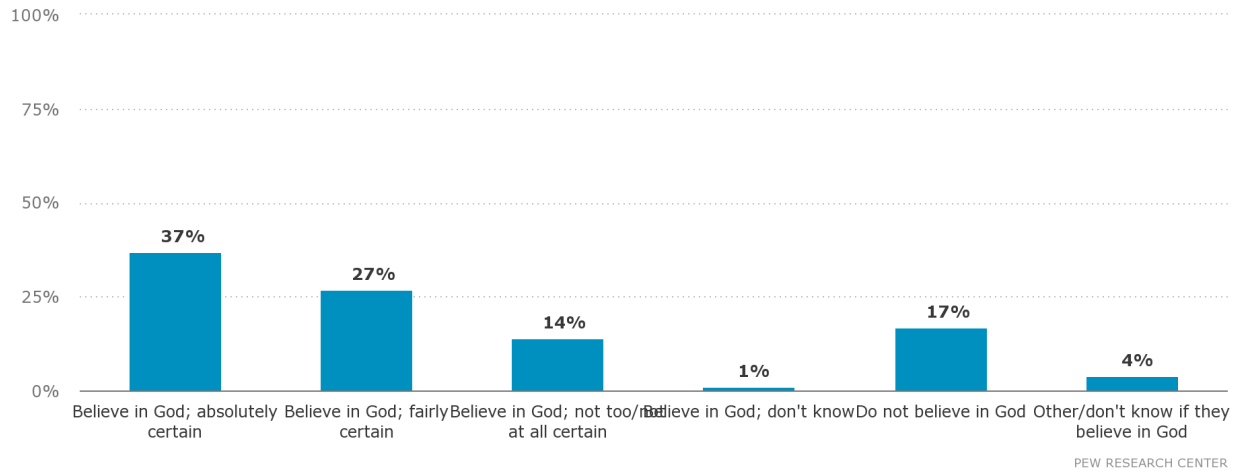
see in the world. We see the God gap when a Bar or Bat Mitzvah student confronts a difficult text about God striking down a man who violates Shabbat, or perhaps a teen learning about the Holocaust, and struggling to understand how God could exist amidst the carnage of the world. This God gap exists even between what I think most of us believe, and the liturgy that we read in our prayerbook. And the gap seems to be widening further and further.

37% of Jews surveyed by the Pew Study in 2016 said they absolutely believe in God. Another 27% say they're fairly certain they believe in

God, and another 36% are in some place of non-belief, uncertainty, or questioning.²

Belief in God among Jews

% of Jews who say they...



In other words, over a third of American Jews are like Schwartz, our synagogue goer who comes to shul to talk to Goldberg. Or maybe they are just Jewish atheists, which a fair number of Jews are. There is a joke about a Jewish atheist who heard that the best school in town happened to be Catholic. He enrolled his son, and things were going well until one day the boy came home and said he had just learned all about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The father, barely able to control his rage, seized his son by the shoulders and said, “David, this is very important,

² <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/jewish/>

so listen carefully: there is only ONE God—and we don't believe in Him!"

But Schwartz— in our original joke— is likely not an atheist. Many of those very same Schwartzes employ a particular way to describe themselves “I'm spiritual, not religious.” “Spirituality” has become the buzz word, and “religion” has gone out of fashion. When people use the term “spiritual,” it's fitting to point out that they generally have trouble defining it. Definitions frequently describe an individual or personal connection to something larger than ourselves. I want to offer a novel definition for the idea of spirituality: Spirituality is feeling, experiencing, or being in relationship with the Divine, without being comfortable with a concrete label.

The phenomenon, I believe, emerges from the God Gap. We feel something, we experience something, but we are inclined to disassociate it from God, because it doesn't fit the traditional model of what our teachers and parents taught us about God. Moreover, many people have

become uncomfortable with the word God. You are probably already sick of me using it so many times since I started this sermon. God isn't even a Jewish word, it's just the best expression of what I'm trying to communicate in the English language. The word is Germanic in origin, and quite frankly, lacks a semblance of Jewish flavor. I would say that God is the common word we have, but our individual experiences are unique, and perhaps the "G" word lacks in helping us understand feelings of spirituality.

If we turn to rabbinic literature and the Bible, we will find over a hundred different names for God:

Adonai, Elohim, Shaddai, Sechinah, El, Yah,

And still, the tradition of words and attributes that we have for God might not even work for us.

Turning to our Haftara this morning, we might find a similar experience with Hannah, who is married to Elkanah, and is unable to have children. Her prayers are so passionate and different from others, that the Priest in the Temple thinks at first that she is drunk. One of the things that was unusual in Hannah's prayer is the way she describes God. She calls God a name that has not previously been heard in the Hebrew Bible. "Adonai Tzevaot," she cries out, which is sometimes translated as "Adonai of Hosts."

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer proclaims this was the first time ever that anyone had referred to the Holy One this way.³

Hannah models spirituality for us. She breaks the typical mold of not just how to connect with something larger than herself, but she labels it with a different name as well.

³ B. Berachot 31b

If the word or name God doesn't work for you, like Hannah, you don't have to use it. You don't have to hold onto what you learned about God when you were a child, you can let it go. You can embrace spirituality, and you can articulate it more thoughtfully as well. If you're having a little trouble giving words to this feeling that you get, that's ok. I'm going to try to get you started.

I want to suggest a few alternative models for God that might speak to the spiritualists, and will hopefully be food for thought for all of us. To do so, we'll have to set aside the traditional modes of "belief" in what we call God, and "faith" in God. Here are three ideas for God that I would like us to consider, God as a verb; God as a feeling, and God in our relationships.

Number 1: God as a Verb

Let's start out with the idea that God might not be a thing, a person, or even an idea. The 12th Century Jewish Mystic Isaac the Blind described

God as Ein Sof, or Endlessness, infinity, beyond tangibility. Rabbi David Cooper explains in his book “God is a Verb” that we can best come to thinking of God as a process rather than a being.⁴ God, he says, can be expressed through mutually interactive verbs that describe the way that we connect with something that is beyond ourselves, and the way that God connects with humanity.

God is more than just be-ing. God is loving, as both God being the process of us being loved and us loving God. God is communicating, that is God is the talking to us, and us talking to God. God is existing, God is creating... and by the way we are partners in that creating. God is meditating, breathing, listening.

We are conditioned to think that God is a thing. And then that God gap happens where we realize that maybe God isn't everywhere, or everything as we might have originally conceived God. God instead

⁴ Cooper, David, *God as a Verb: Kabbalah and the Practice of Mystical Judaism*, Riverhead Books (1997).

might be the process of actions around us, God is a gerund, that grammatical thing we learned about in the 6th grade that describes a verb in its noun state—essentially, verbs that end with “ing” that don’t have a subject because the action itself is being talked about. God might not be a “thing” but rather an “ing,” an I-N-G.

Number 2: God as a Feeling

I want to shift for a second from the Philosophical, to the personal. For those spiritualists out there, let’s use a piece of your language. There is a feeling that we get that seems remarkable and profound, but we often write it off as just an intense feeling, energy, or perhaps connectedness. But maybe, these intense emotions that we live, are our connection points with God.

You might call this a heart-felt connection to God. Or to use the term that one of my colleagues, Rabbi David Wolpe, a “heart-knowing” of God.

Think of those moments where intense emotion opens us up to God in our lives. They say, for example, that there are no atheists in the foxhole, because at intense moments of fear, we clutch onto something for security and protection. At moments of exhilaration and gratitude, people turn outward to acknowledge something they can't explain. The baseball player who hits the game-winning home run, or the football player who scores his first touchdown, looks to the sky, and points upwards. Couples often tell me that when they are under the chuppah, their wedding canopy, the overflowing joy that they feel, is some kind of sense of God. Or the experience at the hospital when your first child comes into this world, is filled with spiritual wonder and awe. How about that moment when you are gazing to the endless horizon at the beach, the waves inching up just up to your toes, and a salty breeze is wafting against your skin? This isn't just a scenic view for many, this is the experience that brings people out to the Hamptons, it's their spirituality, it's where they feel connected to nature, or God.

Recognizing God in these emotions, or “heart-knowing” God requires that we make ourselves emotionally vulnerable. The Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students, where is God? They proceeded to list all of the traditional responses: God is everywhere; God is the primary cause of the world; God is in everything.... No, he admonished them. God is wherever we let God in.

When we make ourselves vulnerable, we experience God through the emotions that life’s experiences offer us. Emotions are a part of every day life, but too often, we call them normal. My challenge for us is to identify God in these moments of intense feeling. This might be what you call spirituality, but it also might be “heart-knowing” God. It might be feeling God in our lives.

Number 3: God in our Relationships

The book of Deuteronomy teaches us that “If you seek God with all of your heart, with all of your soul, then you will find God...” though

perhaps we look too often in the wrong places. The Philosopher Martin Buber suggests an unlikely place that we might find God.

To circle back for a second to my sermon from last night, Buber believes that God exists in the profound relationships that are formed with other human beings.⁵ Buber isn't talking about ordinary interactions that we have, but the extraordinary ones. Most of our connections with other people are utilitarian. That is, you serve a purpose, and I am in relationship with you in order to get something transactional. When you're checking out at the supermarket, the cashier rings you up, gives you change, helps bag your items, and wishes you a good day. Buber calls this interaction an I-It interaction, that is, the other person is serving a function, and it doesn't go anything beyond that. But every now and then, we connect with someone on a much deeper level. When chemistry and empathy connect us profoundly to another person, Buber

⁵ Buber, Martin, *I and Thou*, Charles Scriber's Sons (1923).

calls this an I-Thou relationship. We discover God in the bridge that unites two individuals together.

In these kind of encounters we see a connection between two people beyond the ordinary. That inexplicable force that fuels this spiritual connection, that IS God, according to Buber! When In these profound moments, we become not just in relationship with each other, but also with God. Maybe, just maybe, Schwartz was having an I-Thou connection with Goldberg, and he just didn't know what to call it. Goldberg found God through the traditions of prayer, Schwartz may have been finding God through his friendship with Goldberg, he just didn't have the words to describe it.

The conversation about God doesn't stop here. God is more than just a verb, a feeling, or the spiritual force in a relationship. We should continue talking about the many ways that we relate to a higher power, something beyond ourselves, or an energy within the world. We might not like the name God, but there are hundreds of other labels we might

use that better describe our personal theology. And even if names or labels don't work, I suggest but we make the effort to give language to what it is that we believe. This year, we'll be offering opportunities for congregants to share their spiritual autobiographies during Friday night services, where our community members will describe what it is they believe, and what have been the influences that have shaped their ideas. If you're interested in participating, please be in touch with me or the Cantor. God shouldn't be taboo in our discourse because it's too weighty or religious of a topic. Let's bring discussions of theology into our every day conversations. Do you know what your spouse believes? Your friends? Have you talked to your children about God, or do you just assume that they'll figure it out on their own or in religious school?

Even if you don't talk to God like Goldberg, we can still figure out how to talk about God, spirituality, a divine force, a higher power, Nature, or whatever it is that you believe.

Shanah Tovah