

Kol Nidre 2007-5768

The following is the sermon given by Rabbi Ellen J. Lewis on September 21, 2007

I want to tell you a story my friend Milly told me recently. It is about her grandson Yirmi when he was 5 years old. Yirmi was born profoundly deaf. Although his parents would have preferred for him to have a traditional Yeshiva education, there was no place in Cincinnati for a deaf child to get any kind of education. So when he was a little boy, Yirmi went to a boarding school for the hearing-impaired in St. Louis.

It was a long drive back and forth to Cincinnati for vacations and Milly was usually the one who did it. She says she learned to drive looking sideways so Yirmi could read her lips. She would fill up the time by telling him stories.

One day, she told him the story of Moses at the burning bush. She told him how Moses was tending his sheep when he came upon a burning bush that was aflame but the bush was not consumed. And she told him that God called out to Moses from the bush and said, "I have noticed the plight of my people in Egypt and I have heard their cries." She looked sideways and saw that Yirmi was crying. She pulled over and said, "What is the matter, Yirmi? Does something hurt you? Tell Bubby." And he said to her, "I am not hearing. When HaShem calls me, I will not hear." And Milly said to him, "When HaShem calls you, Yirmi, you will hear."

Milly was certain that although Yirmi might not literally be able to hear God, his n'shamah - his soul - would certainly apprehend God through some other sense. People have always perceived God in whatever ways are available to us, through hearing, seeing, or other ways of sensing. But while there are many ways of experiencing God, Judaism is less concerned about our believing in God than about our behaving in a godlike way.

Yirmi's doubt was about whether he would hear God; our doubts seem to be about whether there is a God to hear. In a recent Harris poll, 58% of Americans are absolutely certain that God exists but only 30% of American Jews. But I wonder if those Jewish numbers would change if the question were phrased differently. What if the pollster had asked instead not "does God exist" or "what is God like" but "How do you experience God?" or "When do you experience God?" or "Do you believe in miracles?" I suspect you would get a different answer. Because the Jewish focus has never been what we believe about God but whether we believe in what God wants us to do.

I grant you that it seems paradoxical. We are after all the people who gave the world ethical monotheism. But our focus has always been on the ethical part of what God wants us to do rather than on the belief in God per se. I always think that this paradox plays out most clearly at public ceremonies like the Oscars. I imagine you have noticed what Vanessa Ochs points out in a recent newspaper column (World Jewish Digest):

At the Academy Awards, you can always count on someone putting God on his or her thank you list. This year, there was Jennifer Hudson, who accepted the award for best supporting actress saying, "Oh my God. I have to just take this moment in. I cannot believe this. Look what God can do...I'd like to thank the Academy. Definitely have to thank God again..." There was Forest Whitaker, winner of the award for best actor who, after thanking his wife, children and ancestors, added, "And God, God who believes in us all. And who's given me this moment, in this lifetime, that I will hopefully carry to the end of my lifetime into the next lifetime." Jewish winners tend to thank their brilliant costar, the writers, the producers, their agent, their spouse, even the parents who always believed they could do it. They thank the Academy of course, but unless an "oh my god" slips in they leave God out. You don't see Jews thanking God at the Oscars.

There is some historical basis for this and it isn't that we aren't a grateful people. It is just that we were a people first before we believed in God. We were slaves together in Egypt; we crossed the Red Sea together. At last, we stood at Sinai and we said: We will do and we will obey, not we will believe. In fact, the rabbis 2000 year ago noted that even after witnessing all these miracles, our ancestors still doubted God but didn't let their doubts interfere with their making a commitment to Torah. Faith in God is not the axis around which the Jewish religion turns. Christianity came into being the opposite way; Christianity is rooted in theology as its primary identity, not in community. That makes the idea of God essential to Christians in a way it isn't to us. You can be a devoted member of the Jewish community without invoking God.

Whatever our doubts about believing in God, we do believe that there are different ways of being godly in this world. Our public heroes don't thank God in public, but they take other actions to show they are a part of the Jewish community. When Shawn Green played for the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2001, he broke his 415 consecutive game streak for Yom Kippur, saying at the time that he owed it to his young Jewish fans. Now that he plays for the Mets, Green has announced that he is not playing tonight. He said, "I wouldn't feel right playing," he said, "I just thought it was the right thing to do. I didn't grow up very conservative or really religious. But at the same time I did want to acknowledge it. So I just figured I had to do what was most consistent with my personal beliefs because that's what everybody really does when they observe holidays." No mention of God, you notice, but his personal beliefs seem consistent with what God would want on Yom Kippur.

Lest I alienate those of you who are not Yankees fans or Mets fans, let me acknowledge that Sandy Koufax and Hank Greenberg paved the way for Shawn Green by their behavior - and who knows what they believed about God. But again, many Jews act in ways that seem to reflect belief even if they are avowed atheists.

Take the Israeli writer David Grossman, who comes from a secular background, a left-wing Zionist background. He has often pronounced, "I am secular." Yet he also has said, "When my son Uri was born, I drove down Har HaTzofim. All had passed peacefully. I thought to myself: How am I able not to thank God? Then I said to myself: But you don't believe in

God. Still I feel obligated to give thanks. Suddenly, I wasn't able to stand alone in front of my son, a miraculous being."

Jewish atheists are different from non-Jewish atheists. In a recent column, Rabbi Shmuley Boteach says, "Jewish atheists...are anything but passive in their atheism. If atheism means the absence of faith, or, to state it somewhat differently, a belief in nothing, then it means something entirely different for a Jew. As Elie Wiesel expressed it, a Jew can love God or a Jew can hate God. But a Jew cannot ignore God."

Nearly 100 years ago, before the State of Israel had come into being, Rav Kook was Palestine's first Chief Rabbi. He made the remarkable statement that Jewish atheism can be distinctly godly. [He] argued that, to look at the world - with all its violence, suffering, injustice, poverty, hunger and darkness - and not experience at least a flicker of what he termed "temporary atheism" was itself a sin, for it demonstrated a hardened and indifferent heart (Quoted by Rabbi Niles Goldstein in World Jewish Digest)

In our tradition, godliness depends less upon what you believe about God than upon how you live a life of Torah. A life of Torah in its essence requires us to serve God by acting in God-like ways, to honor ourselves and other human beings by conducting our relationships ethically and morally. That's why faith isn't a Jewish problem, at least, not in the way faith is understood in the surrounding culture. You may not know that when someone converts to Judaism, we don't ask "Do you believe in God?" but we do ask questions that frankly all born Jews should also ask yourselves,

Do you choose to enter the eternal covenant between God and the people Israel and to become a Jew of your own free will? Do you commit yourself to the pursuit of Torah and Jewish knowledge? Do you pledge your loyalty to Judaism and to the Jewish people under all circumstances? Do you accept Judaism to the exclusion of all other religious faiths and practices? Do you promise to establish a Jewish home and to participate actively in the life of the synagogue and of the Jewish community? If you should be blessed with children, do you promise to raise them as Jews? (Rabbi's Manual)

We ask not "what do you believe" but "what will you commit to do" as part of the people of the covenant. I once had a friend who was a Lutheran minister. Before you could join his church, you took a six-week class in which you studied the dogma of the church and then agreed that this was your belief. I remember telling him that if we required our members to ascribe to a particular belief before we let people join, we would have a very slim membership. And it isn't because so many of you don't believe in God; it is just that your theology isn't the central reason you come to us.

No one at this temple will ever ask you what you believe - not that that would be so terrible and frankly, not that a six-week course in Judaism before joining is such a terrible idea - but you will be asked to mop the Simcha Room, study Torah, participate in the PTO, pick up trash with the Men's Club, and treat each other as if you were created in the image of God. No one will ask you what you believe, but you will be expected to act in a godly way, not just in services but also in the kitchen and in the classroom and in committee meetings. And

if you see someone acting in a way that isn't godly, it is even your job as a member of the community to reprove them - gently.

I like how Rabbi Harold Schulweis expresses this idea (In *Jews and Judaism in the 21st Century*, ed. Rabbi Edward Feinstein, p. 104): "I believe in Godliness but I do not believe that God is a person...but I do believe in the predicates, the gerunds of prayer. In order to believe, I must express my belief behaviorally - in loving, in caring, in being concerned, in lifting up those who are fallen, in healing those who are sick, I express Godliness. I don't need a God-as-person for that."

For people who have a hard time understanding what Schulweis means by predicate theology, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells us how he explains it (in Feinstein, p. 84):

I like to tell the story of the time David Ben-Gurion, then Prime Minister of Israel, went on a European trip to try and sell Israel Bonds and raise some money for the state. He was introduced to the wealthiest Jew in Antwerp, a diamond merchant. He entered the man's sumptuous office. The man said, "Mr. Prime Minister, before you start I want you to know something. I consider myself a human being first a Belgian second and a Jew third. Does that offend you?" and Ben Gurion said, "No, not at all. In Hebrew we read from right to left." That's predicate theology; taking all the things that our tradition says about God and reading them from right to left, so that all those statements are not biographies of God or descriptions of what God is but descriptions of what God does.

Predicate theology is not asking, "Where is God?" or "Who is God?" but "When is God?" What are the moments in which we can find God present?

You find those moments when you connect in a meaningful way with people in the present, no matter how unlikely the place. A colleague of mine finds these moments present in an organization that services the elderly of Boston. Rabbi Sara Paasche-Orlow writes:

Often I am with people whose minds and bodies are betraying them, and they understand that they have a progressive condition. We frequently talk about God and they ask me: Where is God? They want to know if I believe a loving God would have created such a slow endurance-at-the-end existence of suffering. Our conversations return again and again to the issue of accepting the human condition and trying to find strength and comfort in the face of adversity. Through being able to understand the needs and feelings of the other, we create connection and provide each other with an emergent form of interpersonal revelation. We rescue each other from aloneness and allow ourselves to encounter the God inherent in the Other. God happens when we reach out to care beyond ourselves.

At Hebrew Senior Life, there are more than 400 people at the High Holiday services; approximately 150 people come in wheelchairs, helped by volunteers and aides. The high holiday *nusakh* begins with the old fashioned, theologically out-of-date, image of God as King seated on a high and lofty throne. Suddenly, I am transfixed: here in front of me are the thrones of our godliness. The throne is not off floating in the heavens, but here in our midst, found in our every effort to create moments of dignity for the most vulnerable in society.

This is a sea of wheelchairs full of God's majesty and splendor - a vivid scene of dignity radiating from each person. When human dignity is degraded anywhere, each of our godliness is diminished.

You also find those godly moments when you maintain a meaningful connection with the past. Rabbi David Ellenson (Feinstein, above, p. 30) says that our way of perceiving God is directly tied to our own personal histories. He grew up in Virginia in an Orthodox household and eventually made his way to the Reform movement and thankfully to the presidency of our rabbinical school. David Ellenson is not just a scholar but also a person of deep feeling for the Reform movement, for clal Yisrael and for the world at large. He has written that:

All authentic theology must come from the depths of one's own soul...I believe that theology is ultimately an expression of autobiography and that how we think about God and how we think about our ultimate commitments are so bound up with own personal story that it is disingenuous to pretend that there is somehow an objective place outside of the self that can serve as an Archimedean point for theological reflection. All of us are existentially bounded by the contexts and persons that have informed and sustained us, and by our personal responses and reactions to them...

In language a little less opaque, he gives a personal example:

As a teenager with my mother - I remember asking her, "Do you really think all of the Torah - both Written and Oral - comes from God? And my mother responded by saying, "David, I do not know if every single word in the Bible and Talmud was quite literally given by God to Moses at Sinai. However, I can tell you that if the Bible and Talmud were written by men, it was men who were trying to understand what it is that God wants us to do in the world, so that if God were a human being, God would be happy to be a guest in your home." (P. 35)

When we ask questions like "Where is God?" and "When is God?", we aren't asking whether God exists; we are asking how we know what God wants us to do. Levi Weiman Kelman who is now a rabbi in Jerusalem asked that question when he was a child praying in the synagogue where Heschel prayed. In traditional synagogues there is a ritual of *duchenen*, the ceremony where the *kohanim*, men of priestly descent, would stand up at the front of the sanctuary, heads covered with *taleism* and hands raised with split fingers, and recite the traditional priestly blessing upon the congregation. Children have always been told not to look at the kohanim while they recited the priestly blessing because the *Shechinah* descended in the congregation at that moment.

Levi Weiman-Kelman's father told him that he was not permitted to look during the ritual of *duchenen*, because that was when God's presence would fill the synagogue. Of course, Levi, like almost any child, promptly stole a glance at the kohanim while the ceremony unfolded. He then turned to his father and said, "Abba, you told me that I was forbidden to look because I would see God, but instead all I see are men. Where is God?"...Rabbi Kelman told Levi he had asked an excellent question which should be addressed to Rabbi Heschel.

When Levi approached Rabbi Heschel and posed the question, "Where is God?" Rabbi Heschel offered the following response. He said, "Levi, if what you want to do is see God, you need to look in the mirror, but you have to look beyond your face. You have to look deep within yourself, and if you do, you will see that there is a nitzotz, a spark of God's holiness, that is there. And when you look at your father and your mother and your sisters, and when you look at all the people you encounter both within the congregation and throughout the entire world, each one is created in the image of God, and there is a spark of holiness present in every single one of them." And Rabbi Heschel then quickly added, "However, the problem Levi, is that most people forget his truth, and the spark of God that is there remains nistar, forgotten and hidden. Your task, Levi, is to uncover those sparks of holiness that are hidden and you can do this through the performance of mitzvot. You take those sparks that are hidden and you make them revealed in the world. You can remind them that they are created in the image of God." (As told by David Ellenson in Feinstein, above, pp. 36-7)

Every year on these high holy days, I try to think of new ways to talk about God and godliness because I believe that your ideas about God and godliness shouldn't be limited to your personal past but that your ideas should grow as you grow. And what Judaism teaches is that doing *mitzvot* leads to believing; it helps your ideas to grow.

My friend Milly's grandson Yirmi is 24 now and he can hear, at least somewhat, after having cochlear implants. He was able to go to Yeshiva for high school. When he applied to college, they were worried that he wouldn't be able to hear the professors or read their lips. But he reassured them if he could read the lips of bearded professors in Yeshiva, he could read the lips of their professors.

He is studying to become a physical therapist. And he is very good to his Bubbe. I am sure he hears Hashem, not because of the cochlear implants, but because he hears that nitzotz of godliness within him. He has found his way of serving God.

We all serve God with whatever human qualities that belong to each one of us. When Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov was teaching his students in a public place, he told them: "Every human quality and power was created for a purpose. Even base and corrupt qualities can be uplifted to serve God." A bystander challenged him, saying, "You say even base, corrupt qualities can be used to serve God. So tell me, how can the denial of God be used to serve God?" Rabbi Moshe Leib replied: "If someone comes to you for help, you should not turn that person away with pious words, saying, 'Have faith! Trust God; God will help you!' No! You should act as if there were no God, as if there were only one person in the world who could help this human being - You! (Buber, Tales of the Hassidim) Whatever you believe - act as if there is no God and God's world will be a better place.

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