

4th Year Sermon – The God I Believe In

יה, Eternal Breath of Life, where can I find You?

Your מקום is exalted, hidden

But... where do I *not* find You?

Your כבוד fills all space and time

I'm not quite sure when I first learned this Yehuda HaLevi poem.

I am sure, however, that it describes one of the most basic elements of my belief in God: that God is, at once, both immanent and transcendent; both within our world and beyond it.

The first time I experienced this aspect of the Divine, I was sitting in the woods at the URJ Camp Harlam. On Shabbat mornings, as we take the Torah from the ark, we would always sing Debbie Friedman's *S'u Sh'arim.... (singing)* The melody builds momentum, growing to a musical and theological climax in which hundreds of voices sing out שמע ישראל ה אלקינו ה אחד.

Over 13 summers, in that moment each and every week, I met God.

Just like in Halevi's poem, there were two components to my awareness of God's presence. The first element resonated deeply *within* me. It became manifest in the form of the tingles down my spine as we sang those words, and my anticipation of that internal vibration amplified its frequency. The second component was something beyond me; something that I sensed lived independently of me. It was the awareness of a Force, a Process much greater than myself, and greater even than the sum of the hundreds of souls praying *sh'ma* in the woods of eastern Pennsylvania.

But only in the last couple of years have I begun to feel comfortable articulating my sense and experience of the Divine.

You see, God did not make any appearance in my application materials to HUC. During my panel interview in New York, I was asked about this ominous omission, and since it had been intentional, I gave a semi-prepared, semi-Kaplanian answer: “I’m not really all that interested in God,” I told the committee. “I believe in God, but God isn’t really a critical component of why I want to be a rabbi—our communities, our culture, our songs, prayers, holidays, and holy texts—*those* are what call me to the rabbinate; to a life of service to the Jewish people.”

The committee apparently recognized my sincerity, and didn’t challenge me on my theology. But today I need to do just that. It’s not enough to have a personal theology, or to retreat to our fortress of academia when it comes to God. We need to be able to share our approach with others.

I’m willing to wager that many of us have ways to pivot conversations *away* from God as I did in my interview. Despite our running joke, *within* this community I’ve noticed a fair degree of comfort talking about God, but I worry that we don’t always translate that comfort beyond these walls. Yet I think we serve our communities’ best interests when we hone our ability to bring God *into* conversations, rather than finding clever or not-so-clever ways to *avoid* theology.

One of the many reasons that we need to embrace dialogue about God relates to the sociological reality of our communities of practice. We often work with a Jewish population that “completed” its Jewish education around the age of, oh, 13 or so. But this results in a sort of arrested theological development. In all other areas of life and education we ideally continue to grow and develop, but when it comes to God, we often encounter people tackling adult-problems with juvenile theologies. The irony, of course, is that adults have just as much need for relationship with the Divine as children, maybe even more, but we aren’t usually as comfortable discussing our faith quite as readily with them as we do with our children. Pivoting *towards* God, however, might allow us to rekindle adult thought, exploration, and struggle which ultimately may serve to improve the lives of the people we work with.

Beyond this sociological reality, our role as symbolic exemplars and public figures demands that we reconnect with God and that we help our communities do the same. Our Reform movement has long prided itself on our moral compass; on our aspiration to the visions and values of our

prophets. But our policy positions risk becoming pure politics if we pass on opportunities to connect them back to our texts, to our tradition, and yes, to our understanding of the Divine.

So *how* do we bring God back into our communal conversations or our public discourse? Our strategies must reflect the personal, subjective nature of contemporary theologies. Luckily, our tradition has a long history of using two literary methods that can help us move along this path: narrative and poetry.

We know that narrative helps bring meaning to our experience and our practice, but it also brings our theologies to life. The more we find the moments in our lives in which we encounter the Divine, and the more we share them and encourage others to do the same, the further we can move on the path to a life imbued with meaning, purpose, and direction

Look no further than the beginning of this week's פרשה to see God help Moses realize precisely this! Moses doubts his ability to persuade Pharaoh, so God reminds Moses that the He is the same God who "appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, and established a covenant with them." To prove Moses' ability to move forward, God places Godself in Moses' *story*.

Yehuda HaLevi's Rabbi says basically the same exact thing to the Kuzar king, declaring that he believes in the God of "Abraham, Isaac, and Israel" who led the children of Israel out of Egypt..." Because for HaLevi, it was the God of History—literally of *his story*—Who was still the central figure with whom we, as Jews, must seek relationship; it was the God of narrative, both historical and personal, who remained exalted and hidden, and Who simultaneously filled all creation with כבוד.

As a tool for exploring God, we must use narrative too. We must share from our own experience of the Divine Presence, and from our own struggles to find it. We must be the exemplars of exploring the network of memories that connect us to our ancestors, to those yet to come, and to the Almighty.

Poetry can also open the gates of discourse on the Divine. Our poetic tradition spans just as long, maybe longer than our narrative inheritance. From the words of שירת הים to Yehuda Halevi to the Zionist poet Rachel, poetry helps us mine the jewels of our tradition. And finding our own poetic voice just might help us bring the prophetic voice of our tradition to bear on our current moment in history.

In the words of spoken word poet Sarah Kay, poetry “is not just [about] the adage ‘write what you know’—it’s about gathering up all of the knowledge and experience you’ve collected up to now to help you dive into the things you *don’t* know. I use poetry,” she says, “to help me work through what I *don’t* understand, but I show up to each new poem with a backpack full of everywhere else that I’ve been.”

I think we can apply this idea to our theologies, too. We can use poetry to explore what God has been throughout our lives, and to dive into the things we don’t yet know about the Divine. To that end, I’d like to conclude this afternoon by sharing a poem I’m working on, entitled “The God I believe in.”

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Describing the God I believe in as “God” doesn’t really do Her justice. She prefers when we get a bit more creative despite limitations of language and peculiarities of pronouns: Holy One, Source of Blessing, Oneness, Breath of Life, Eternal—Well, I guess God works for short

The God I believe in expects us to be stewards of this earth whose creative processes She spoke into being and renews each day

The God I believe in created all humanity in Her image; a seed of her imagination taking root and growing inside each of us.

The God I believe in is both within creation and beyond it; immanent and transcendent. She acts like the very air we breathe, the wind in the sails of our spirits; Her ruach animates, sustains, changes us from within; and as soon as we exhale Her we are reconnected to all that breathes

The God I believe in is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and She's also the God of Eve, of Hagar, of Shifra and Puah and the Daughters of Tzelofchad

—The God I believe in does not act in history, but Her spirit guided us from the house of bondage, saved us and redeemed us and took us to be Her people, YES, the God I believe in freed *me* from slavery in Egypt, even if the archeologists aren't quite sure we were ever there

The God I believe in has revealed precisely

— מה ה' דורשת ממנו — כי עם עשות משפט ואהבת צדק והצנע לכת אתה —

(what she demands of us—only to act righteously, love justice, and walk humbly with her)

and She knows exactly how daunting it is to try to לכת אתה *(walk with her)*

The God I believe in pushes us into the pool of Torah, shocking our senses with the cold waters of learning and discovery; She lives in our never-ending need to use our hands and pray with our feet to leave this world at least a little better than we found it

The God I believe in doesn't care if you can walk physically, because you can walk in Her paths without legs; She doesn't care if you can see, she'll enlighten your eyes anyway; She doesn't care *who* you love, but you better believe She cares *that* you love the reflection of Her Face in the face of the Other.

The God I believe in knows that sometimes I feel helpless and useless in the face of injustice, but she gives me permission to struggle, and doubt, and lose my temper all the same

The God I believe in lures us to choose hope and hardwork over fear and despair; She calls us to rise above our failures and our missed opportunities, and She gives us the creativity and the memory to pursue her through narrative and through poetry.

What God do you believe in? I hope you'll continue to find your voice, and tell your story, and I hope you'll encourage others to start doing the same.