

Sermon for Rosh Hashanah Evening 5768  
Images of God

Our prayers keep reminding us: this is the season of God – God, the Ruler and the Judge; God, the compassionate forgiver; God, the comforter. Those roles sound similar to that Christian concept, which we Jews so vehemently reject, the concept of a Divine Trinity. You may have heard about Charlie, a young Jewish boy from a small Southern town. Charlie's friends taught him about the Trinity – that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Charlie told his father, a typical American Jew, who straightened out his son. His father said, "Son, we are Jewish. There's only one God, and we don't believe in Him."

To believe, or not to believe, that is not the question, or, at least, that is not the most basic religious question. The most basic religious question is: what does my life mean? In other words, do I just exist? Or, do I exist for a purpose? In relation to God, the question, which is most related to what my life means, may be, "what is my image of God?" Think about God. What image popped into your mind? Was God friendly and caring, or angry and scary? Was God close, accessible, understandable, or remote and confusing? The image of God, which we envision, shapes our beliefs and our behavior.

Our tradition provides many positive images of God, while many of our people hold negative images of God. They picture a God of wrath and a God of narrow mindedness. These portrayals are popular among Christians, and even among Jews. These images lead a significant number of Jews, especially Americans and Israelis, to doubt, or to deny God's existence. A Harris poll last year found only 30% of American Jews are absolutely certain that God exists. We might interpret those results as vague, given that few of us are "absolutely certain" about anything. However, 76% of Protestants and 64% of Catholics claimed that level of belief.

This is not new. My mother taught me the Jewish formula for expressing faith, doubt, or denial. She learned this, when she was a child. The believer says, "Shema yisrael, Adonay Eloheinu, Adonay Echad." The doubter, or agnostic, says, "Shema yisrael, I dunno Eloheinu, I dunno Echad." And the atheist says, "Shema yisrael, I deny Eloheinu, I deny Echad."

I maintain a personal affinity for those who do not believe. The God, who is often portrayed by Jews and Christians, even the God who might be heard in the words of our prayer books, is not the God in whom I believe. That is the God whose existence or presence I denied, for about a decade of my life.

What are my images of the God, in whom I do not believe?

I do not believe in God, the magical genie, the fantasy parent, the God who solves all our problems and protects us from all harm. On Rosh Hashanah, some seek a God, who will not only grant forgiveness, but will also save them from the consequences of their mistakes. If God does that, then human free choice would be a sham. If so, then life would be worthless.

Contrast the God, who does it all for us, with God as our partner. Partnership implies mutual decision making power. We, as well as God, determine the ultimate result. For me to assert, as I do, faith in God as partner, then I have to assert a faith in the human partners, at least in our potential for good.

The greatest challenge to my faith is the question – are people capable, on balance, of goodness? We do so much evil. Some, we do not intend. Albert Einstein wrote: “Two things are infinite: the universe and human stupidity. And, I’m not sure about the universe.” Sadly, much of the evil we do is intentional. Each day, we encounter examples of outrageous, inexcusable human evil.

In a world of such evil, how can I assert that humanity, on balance, has the ability to become good? I start with empathy, and respect, for those who assert that, on balance, humanity is hopeless. Yet, when I hear of human evil, I also hear of reactions of horror and outrage. How could we feel such outrage, unless, at our core, we seek goodness? We also react with compassion for the victims. What is the source of that compassion, unless it reflects the God within us? My image of a God, filled with outrage, and filled with compassion, brings me comfort. (based on a statement by Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his bestseller, When Bad Things Happen to Good People, where he called this outrage and compassion “the surest proof of God’s existence.” )

Where was God during the Holocaust? God was crying out to us – stop this evil. The Nazis and their collaborators were not listening. Those who stood by, without resisting, were also not listening. God was also crying with us. If, as I deeply believe, God lives within us, then, when we suffer, God also suffers. Holocaust scholar Emil Fackenheim often finds his faith shaken. How does Fackenheim respond? He looks to those, who resisted the Nazis. If many people, in the midst of unbelievable evil, could find enough faith in human potential to enable them to resist, then, today, we can find that faith. Resistance creates the possibility of faith. From that start, we can reason. We can reflect on our experiences. We can search inside.

So far, I have denied a faith in a God, who would undo our mistakes, and who would eliminate human evil. I also do not believe in a God, who heals all of our illnesses. However, I do believe that God gave us the resources to eliminate all illness. Imagine if we spent on medical research, even half of what we spend on conflicts -- on war, on crime, on domestic violence, and on economic battles. Then, imagine if we actually took care of ourselves, as we know we should, and can. The direct cause of most suffering is not God. God provides adequate resources. We use them wrong. The same is true for the horrendous suffering from poverty, hunger, and even the suffering caused by floods, hurricanes, and earthquakes.

Shifting responsibility to people does not answer the ultimate theological question. Why does a good God, who is supposedly all powerful, allow so much unjust, undeserved suffering? Over twenty years ago, I wrote my Rabbinic thesis on two responses to that question, by two thinkers, who questioned God's power. I have yet to find a clear, compelling answer. In other settings, we can discuss some of those not so clear, not so compelling answers.

What I find most useful is not answering the question of evil, but responding to evil. Our tradition wisely calls more for proper behavior, than for proper faith. A classic chasidic story describes a chasid, who loses his faith. He confronts his Rabbi with his doubts, his overwhelming doubts, that God even exists. To the chasid's surprise, the Rabbi congratulates him on his doubts. "Why?" the chasid asks. Because, the Rabbi answers, the next time you encounter a hungry person, you will feed him, rather than waiting for God to help out.

We can deny God's presence, as long as we act, according to Godly values. We can profess atheism or humanism, as long as we sense some forces within us, pushing us to show our love. We need not call those forces God, although that is what I believe. We do need to nurture them. Most of us have heard the story, from many tribal traditions, about two beasts inside of us, battling for control. One beast is fear. The other is love. Which prevails? The one we feed most. Judaism provides a more sophisticated version of that battle, about our yetzer tov and our yetzer harah. That subject is another one for another setting.

For tonight, consider how to express our love, instead of our fears. Martin Buber, one of the greatest modern theologians, taught us one key. We strengthen our relationships. When we feel alienated, emotionally isolated from each other, then we lose the link that fuels our empathy, our innate ability to care about others. So many trends in contemporary society distance us from each other. Our connections to family, to friends, to colleagues, and to neighbors have loosened dramatically.

How to understand those trends and how to overcome them are more subjects for other settings.

One way to start is try one act of caring. Our tradition teaches, mitzvah goreret mitzvah, one mitzvah leads to the next. Each time we fulfill our calling, whether helping others, or helping ourselves, we find new strength, energy, and even wisdom for more helping. Perhaps, we will solve our theological dilemmas about God and evil, more by our actions than by our thoughts.

Can most Jews find an image of God, in whom we can believe? I believe so. We can find the God of our tradition, a God who demands justice, yet a God who also demands mercy and caring. We can find a God, who desires us to act, decisively, and thoughtfully. We can even find a God, who encourages us to doubt God's existence, or God's goodness, as long we don't use our doubt as an excuse for harming God's creatures, especially harming other people and harming ourselves.

More than that, we can find a God, who teaches us about our limits. Perhaps, as our Talmud says, we lack the ability to understand the suffering of the innocent. Yet, that same God teaches us about our potential greatness, that is, our ability to transform our world from how it is to how it should be.

Those teachings represent the God in whom I do believe. I believe in the God, who taught Abraham, Moses, and, now, us, to live by those teachings, which we also call Torah. I believe in the God, who challenges me to question, to be skeptical about everything, even our Torah. I also believe in the God, who challenges me to live properly, even when my questions do not yet have clear answers. And, I believe in the God, who helps me find – not answers, but meaning.

The God in whom I believe is much more complex than the God in whom I do not believe. That is the insight of Rabbi Hillel, who taught: "Show love for others, as we do for ourselves. That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. Now, go and study." Our life, with God, is commentary. We need to "go and study," and to live by what we learn.

L'shana tova u'metukah. To a good and sweet year.