

Kol Nidre Sermonette

Rabbi Donniel Hartman, in his book *Putting God Second*, lists a few issues that people of faith have because of their faith. He calls these issues God Intoxication and God Manipulation. He also mentions those verses where the TaNaKH itself can be considered problematic. Monotheism comes with a couple of booby traps, as it were. I think having a relationship with God is a pretty good thing. However, there are ways that having a relationship with a God who is the source of all, can mess with your mind.

Practically any action which humans perform can be justified as an imitation of God. All of us are mostly fine with that when it comes to healing or agriculture. We should not be so fine with it when it comes to murder, massacre or torment. These too can be declared to be an imitation of the jealous God.

This next sentence is part of the resolution to the dilemma, but I feel the need to balance what I just said with it. It is really important to remember that just because God did something or ordered something, does not make that deed or order good. Many with intense desire to filter everything through their particular God lenses are often certain that what God does is good, by definition.

It is easy to jump from the premise that there is only one God to the conclusion that there is only one right way for that singular God to be worshipped.

People for whom God is important and those people who for various reasons deny God's existence (or the usefulness of thinking God exists) may hold conversations concerning the various texts, but often their bias colors what they read so that neither completely sees how the other person even unearths their conclusions from the text. This particular quotation seems to sum up the matter so far: "The nature of monotheism's autoimmune disease is that God's presence, and the human religious desire to live in relationship with God, often distracts religion's adherents from their traditions' core moral truths."

A tale is told that begins to illustrate this – in one of the Jewish communities in Europe, a great sage was on his way home when he heard an infant crying. He located the house where he heard the crying, and went inside. There was an adult in the room with the child, but that adult was engaged in fervent prayer. So the sage proceeded to pick up the young one and started doing all the things one does to try and stop a child's cry. After a while, the individual praying finished and then noticed the sage. "Why are you here?" he asked. "I heard the child crying, so I came in to comfort her." "I was so intent on my prayer that I did not even hear the cries." The sage replied, "If praying makes one deaf to the cries of a child, there is something wrong with the prayer."

Moses and Abraham sometimes hear the potential crying of infants and adults, which helps give impetus to their challenge to God to act appropriately, rather than simply react. Jonah, on the other hand, feels that his commitment to God requires that he protect God from the mistaken results of acting compassionately.

Moses, Abraham and the sage of the story exemplify a concept Rabbi Hartman calls nonindifference. Jonah does not, as his fervor for God renders him indifferent to the suffering of the people of Nineveh. Jonah delivers his message at least one day's journey into the city, and seems never to notice any of the people there.

There are plenty of rules in Jewish law concerning how one is supposed to support those who are in need. The issue is not simply the creation of a law, but the development and reinforcement of an attitude of nonindifference. One way that the tradition tried to instill this quality was through the development of the sabbatical year. If there is no planting, then all are reliant upon what God provides. This greater level of uncertainty is supposed to help a person understand how to support the needy between the sabbatical years.

Sidebar for a second: because we have a name for them, it is easy to talk about the homeless as if they are all the same, and the same kind of help will be good enough for all of them. Some basic levels of assistance, (helping them have fewer things to worry about as they make their way back into society, like food, shelter and clothing), seem to be the same throughout that population. Everything else is very person specific, and requires thought so that the help you give is the best kind of help needed. Dignity for the individual involved, throughout the entire process of being helped, and respect for the image of God which they represent are both essential.

There are some people who do not seem to take seriously the lesson of the sabbatical year. They show less concern for an individual's dignity than they do to the affront they deem is being perpetrated when somebody ignores one of God's commands. One Talmudic example of this involves wearing garments that contain Shatnez – basically a combination of fabrics that was limited to the priesthood. What happens if you figure out sometime after you put your clothes on, specifically while you are on the street, that your clothing contained shatnez? Most responses came with a bit of common sense, and indicated that if you find yourself in that situation, you should go home and change. A few said that increasing the wrongdoing was improper, and you should take off your clothes as soon as you notice that they are the wrong type – even if that meant you became embarrassed by being naked, for it is far better that you be embarrassed than that God be disobeyed. One or two of the Rabbis go even as far as to encourage a form of Fashion Police – if you see shatnez on somebody else in the streets, take their clothes off to keep them from disobeying God.

This is God Intoxication, one of monotheism's autoimmune diseases.

What do we do about it? How can we keep from being intoxicated by God, without denying God altogether?

The prophets are quite clear that acting piously is not sufficient, unless your piety also includes behaviors rooted in ethical sensitivity towards others. It does seem very clear that when a person places God first, then responsibility towards people takes a very far second, which is exactly the opposite of what should happen. Part of one discussion in the Talmud asks whether burying a met mitzvah, (a stranger whom you see dead before you) which is a commandment is overridden by fulfilling the commandment of reading the megillah (and thereby uncovering the presence of God in everyday moments). It makes sense that the person focused on God would indicate that the body is already dead, so why let burying the dead interfere with understanding more about God's nature? The Talmudic discussion indicates that the reverse is true – God can wait.

This really has to be the main point of religious training – ethics are primary. Walking with God can be done by walking with other people in their sorrows and suffering. Almost everything we do ritually in Judaism, and all the many things we study, are training manuals for doing this in an appropriate manner.