

Sarah's Experience Of God

Theology From Matriarchal Skepticism And Laughter

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Leonard Gordon

A commentary to the opening lines of the *amidah* "Our God and God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, God of Isaac and God of Jacob," explains that the names are repeated because each patriarch re-interpreted God in the light of his own relationship with the divine. No son accepted his father's God-idea without revision. Each had direct experience of the divine presence and each responded differently.

Living in our day we cannot hear such an explanation without asking the next logical question: What was the experience of the divine apprehended by the matriarchs? Can our tradition give us insight into the God of Sarah, Rebekkah, Rachel, and Leah? Genesis chapter 18 yields just such insights: three angels, identified in the text as mysterious men, visit Abraham:

(9) They said to him, "Where is your wife, Sarah?" And he replied, "There, in the tent." (10) Then one said, "I will return to you when life is due and your wife Sarah shall have a son!" (11) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah had stopped having periods of women. (12) And Sarah laughed to herself, saying "Now that I am withered, am I to have enjoyment -- with my husband so old?" (13) Then the LORD said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, saying 'Shall I in truth bear a child, old as I am?'"

God spares Abraham's feelings: Sarah's real disbelief concerned Abraham's virility and not her own fertility! In any case, God continues to Abraham:

(14) "Is anything too wondrous for the LORD? I will return to you at the time that life is due, and Sarah shall have a son." (15) Sarah dissembled, saying, "I did not laugh," for she was frightened. He replied, "But you did laugh."

This reading begins with the fulfillment of God's promise. Even so, Sarah's incredulity continues. In verse 21:6 Sarah says,

"God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." (7) And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age."

Sarah's situation mirrors that of Jewish women across the ages. God's messengers are in the tent, talking to Abraham, while behind the tent's walls, Sarah waits, taking care of the men's needs and listening in to their conversation to catch hints of her own destiny. Most

surprisingly to us, who expect a pious attitude from our biblical heroes and heroines, Sarah's response is both detached and bemused. "Give me a break, God, even when Abraham was my young devoted lover we couldn't produce a child, and you're telling me that now, after we have wasted our lives crying bitter tears you are finally going to make us parents. Well, thanks a lot, but next time get your timing right!"

Sarah's words echo the experiences of Jews throughout the generations who have waited for promised redemption and have cried angry tears over the losses of our people and all people who have suffered during the seemingly endless wait. Were the messianic age to dawn tomorrow we would turn to God and ask, "So long, so long; why did you wait? What did it all mean?"

Today all Jews are in Sarah's position: we are all in the position of our mothers and grandmothers. Today we no longer hear God's message spoken directly. At best, we are like Sarah, we catch glimpses of a divine plan by peeking through curtains. And when we do we are unable to relax. Every time we hear of a Jewish leader of high moral purpose, an Abraham Joshua Heschel who marched for civil rights in the sixties and seventies, a Natan Sharansky fighting tirelessly for his sisters and brothers in the Soviet Union, we also hear of corrupt Jewish businessmen on Wall Street who head Jewish philanthropies or of a Rabbi Kahana spreading hate in Israel in the name of our tradition. Not for us is the faith of Abraham marching with a knife held high for his Lord. We have learned to be more skeptical of those who act in God's name. We have grown more skeptical of God.

For some, skepticism precludes identification even with Sarah. After all, in the end Sarah sees God's promise fulfilled, and we can point to no similar redemptive act in our day. Belief in God has been challenged by science, and by history, via our awareness of the conflict of religious truth claims and by our own experience of our world. We face the question of whether such a position places us outside the Jewish religious community. Plato proposed, for example, that individuals who did not hold the correct religious beliefs should be imprisoned for five years, even if they "ally themselves with the good." The emphasis on the removal of heretics in the medieval church by the orthodox, or "right thinking" would lend support to the relationship between correct views and the

religious life. But Judaism has never proposed the exclusion to those who question God. Rabbi Heschel taught that Judaism does not command belief, it commands memory. The commandment of faith in the Bible is "Remember that you were slaves in the Land of Egypt."

That memory, of oppression and redemption, is invoked to guide us in orthopraxy, "right actions." Judaism is concerned with how the memory of our people's past, and the memory of their encounter with the divine, will influence our actions today. We read and reread our old books not because they were revealed on a mountain top but because they have been revered and commented upon by generations of women and men before us.

More recently, the Conservative movement has published a booklet, entitled *Emet Ve-Emunah* (1988) codifying a Jewish theology for our time. The opening page begins by reaffirming the centrality of the divine in our religion. It begins with a simple declaration: "We believe in God." From there, in classic Jewish style, the document continues to raise the important questions: "Does God exist? If so, what sort of being is God? Does God have a plan for the universe? Does God care about me? Does He [sic] hear prayer? Does God allow the suffering of the innocent?" These questions are serious ones and no simple answers can be given. In fact, as Jews, we demand no simple affirmations, no statements of belief. *Emet Ve-emunah* concludes that "One can live fully and authentically as a Jew without having a single satisfactory answer to such questions and doubts; one cannot, however, live a thoughtful Jewish life without having asked the questions" (1). We are a people characterized by our need to question more than by our acceptance of answers on faith.

With this understanding in mind, we must rethink what it means to be a religious Jew, identifying the category "religious" with a way of living in the world and not with the acceptance of certain formulae. We would do well to follow the path suggested by *Emet Ve-Emunah* and struggle for a moment more with a definition of God. In a time when many of us do not think about God, and others of us cannot do so comfortably or meaningfully, what we need to know is how ancient ideas about the Jewish God can be made relevant to our own lives. We need that our own thinking about God lead us to behaviors that improve ourselves and the world.

The Promethean figure in modern American Judaism is Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. In his decades as professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary, Rabbi Kaplan stressed one theme: that rabbis must say words from the pulpit that they themselves can accept. He was a tireless fighter against confused thinking and speeches that hid behind the pieties of past generations. In his classic work, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, he wrote the following summary of his views on our subject:

To the modern individual, religion can no longer be a matter of entering into a relationship with the supernatural. The only kind of religion that can help human beings live and get

the most out of life will be the one which will teach people to identify as divine or holy whatever in human nature or in the world outside the human being enhance human life. People must no longer look upon God as a reservoir of magic powers to be tapped whenever they are aware of their physical limitations.

Rather than abandon the concept of God, Kaplan would have us reinterpret it. Once you begin from Kaplan's idea of God, an entirely new understanding of our tradition emerges. In his system "God" comes to mean that impulse inhuman society that corresponds to what we mean by conscience in the individual. By giving that force a name we are able to identify what we consider good, true and worthwhile and pledge ourselves to live up to it.

But at the same time, the historical experience of our people teaches us that this world is a place of pain and sorrow. The good is not always triumphant. In fact, it often seems to us as though the forces for evil and death in the world are vastly more powerful. This then is a tension with which we live. We imagine a life of godliness and aspire to it, while acknowledging that such perfectability is beyond our grasp. Rather than give up, this realization drives us to seek the actualization of the divine in the world all the more.

That is why Jews have seen themselves throughout history as active participants in the project of *tikkun olam*, the repair of the world. Through our deeds, large and small, we exert influence, and we act in the world with the understanding that what we do, in our everyday but extraordinary lives, will matter. Small deeds of kindness, a visit to the hospital, a donation of toys to a day care center, active involvement in the political process, serving a meal at a shelter -- these are the acts which recognize the reality of suffering in the world and which acknowledge the human role in alleviating it.

While our tradition is fundamentally centered on the possibilities of human action, our prayers focus our attention on the meaning of divine action. Take, for example, the shema prayer during which we affirm our loyalty to the Lord our God who is one. Rabbi Kaplan translated the word *echad* in this context not as meaning one, but as meaning "unique" and he understood the prayer as teaching the unity of God. From Kaplan's perspective, when we speak of divine unity we are setting for ourselves a goal of becoming united, of integrating ourselves and all units of society -- political, religious and artistic -- to work towards moral goals. None of our energies should be diverted from these goals to other lesser ones which we name in the Jewish tradition "the worship of other gods."

Who are these "other gods?" Other gods are the habits that enslave our lives, the psychological barriers to change, the excuses for the way things are which prevent us from seeing what might be. They are the patterns that do harm to us and to those we love: we evade, we close our eyes; we know and we don't know that we persist in destructive behaviors. The Yom Kippur service contains lists of behaviors and requires us to name them. In that

way we may confront these "sings" and cease to worship other gods, beginning to do service to the ideals we profess.

Other gods are worshipped in the overzealous patriotism which stresses allegiance to a flag, but ignores the values which the flag should represent. The concern for externals, appearances, and wealth at the expense of a concern for individual human beings who deserve our help because of our common humanity. When we expend all of our energies on self-improvement and inner-directed projects and ignore the poor and homeless in our community, we are worshipping other gods. And when we deny the common humanity and the common divinity which links us to the poor, the sick and the helpless, talking about them as if they deserved their fate, then we are worshipping other gods.

The larger message of our tradition is clear: charity and good works must be directed both inwardly and outwardly, within our community and toward the larger world community. In practice this becomes very difficult. Recently, new Jewish charities such as the American Jewish World Service, the Jewish Peace Fellowship, the Jewish Fund for Justice and the New Israel Fund have sought to achieve this balance in their giving and in their projects.

Finally, from the perspectives on God I have already discussed, what meaning should we give to the word "sin?" If God can not not be understood as a commanding figure pronouncing for all time what is right and what is wrong,

then we are no longer able to judge with the same certainty what behaviors are right and wrong. "Sin" will come to name disharmony in ourselves, an absence of unity with regard to our goals so that we heed those voices within that hold us down and ignore the voice that challenges us to rise.

Our task must then ultimately begin within ourselves. We must suspend our judgments of others long enough to make some decisions about where we stand and where our commitments lie for the coming year and beyond. Our tradition makes life complex by sending us competing messages about how to redirect our energies. There are no simple answers in the Jewish tradition. Our tradition simply offers us a creative tension to work within. Somewhere between the hoped for messianic age and this one, between our drive for community and our desire to help others, between our sense of unity and our need to recognize diversity lies the truth, the godly path in life.

I return to the place where we began: Sarah's laughter. Sarah laughed at God's promise and then named her son Yitzhak, "he will laugh." As heirs to this tradition, we are heirs to laughter, dubious laughter, surprised laughter, finally the laughter of wonder. And if some of us have lost faith in the promises of a supernatural God, we may yet be made to wonder at our own capacities for miracles. Sarah teaches that the pleasure of renewal comes in age as well as in youth and that a divine presence may burst forth unpredictably in the form of an ordinary human event. We watch and we wait.