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# Believing

What do we believe? When it comes to God, the whole idea of a divine being or force, a transcendent or perhaps immanent power in the universe, we spend a lot of time thinking about what we should believe, what others tell us we ought to believe, or what we definitely, without a doubt, do NOT believe. I often talk to people who say they don't believe in God. With varying degrees of shame and defiance, they will sometimes explain that they just don't believe in some white-haired superman sitting on a golden throne in the heavens raining lightning bolts down on the earth. Well, I say, yes. I don't believe in Zeus either. But what about what we actually do believe? Is there something there? Something we could believe? And could it help us live out our days in a fuller way? Could it bring comfort and clarity to our hearts? Could it make our lives more meaningful? If we could take some time to tease it out, if we could just stop thinking about what we don't believe and think deeply for a little bit about what we do believe?

Judaism has no creed, no statement of faith that is required of us, not to be a Jew and not to become a Jew. Standards of behavior, of course, we have a lot of those; that's what the mitzvot are all about. But we do not identify each other by belief and we do not organize ourselves around belief, and we do not require particular beliefs of those who might choose to join the Jewish people through conversion. This sets us apart from the other religious traditions that surround us, which do for the most part center around faith and do require, to greater or lesser degrees, particular statements of belief in order to be considered a member or disciple. Jewish tradition is simply not like that. Certainly, there are limits. We know that the Torah specifies that God is One, and that that One God has no form or likeness, no body or physical existence. At the moments when the Israelites came closest to God, when God communicated with them somehow at Mt. Sinai, the Torah is clear: "The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but no shape did you perceive—nothing but a voice."[1] With due respect to those who might believe in deities that are incarnated in objects or bodies, that is clearly outside of Jewish tradition. But within the realm of a unique, immaterial divinity, Jews are free to believe what we will.

Tonight I want to ask you to join me in a thought experiment, to think seriously about what we believe. To begin, we need to clear some ground by shedding some of the assumptions we might have acquired about God. First, we need to let go of our literalism, the idea that the images and descriptions that our ancestors used to get us to think about God, those that fill our prayer books and even the Torah itself, are or were intended to be literal statements about God's essence. The ancients knew as well as we do that God is not a king or a father, not a male or female, not a fire or an earthquake. God does not have mighty arms with which to free us from Egypt, and God does not have ears with which to hear our cries and our prayers. The ancient and medieval and modern scholars and rabbis who used these terms intended them as metaphors, analogies that they drew from their own life experience to try to

[1] Deuteronomy 4:12.

convey something they thought was true about God. To say that God is a king is to assert that God has power that exceeds our own. To say that God is a parent is to argue that God cares for us. To say that God has a womb is to affirm that God is our source. To say that God is a fire is to claim that God is a process, the force of becoming. To say that God has a mighty arm is to hope that God can be a force for justice in the world. And to say that God has ears is to pray that the divine really does take note of us, our suffering and our supplications. We should not be like small children who, when a finger is pointed at something, look at the finger. These metaphors are pointing at something transcendent that is not so easy to describe, so we need to look in the direction they point in the hopes of perceiving something imperceptible.

Second, we need to rid ourselves of the unsolvable philosophical riddle that has been foisted upon us by millennia of thinkers. They have insisted that in order to qualify as divine, God must be omniscient (that is, all-knowing), omnipotent (that is, all-powerful), and omnibenevolent (that is, all-good).[2] Unfortunately, these three qualifications seem to have been created not to encourage speculation about God but to stifle it before it can begin. If we think a little, we immediately see that God cannot have all of these three qualities. If God is all-knowing, what happens to free will? If God is all-powerful, how can humans defy God? And if God is all-good, how could God fail to stop the evil we see around us in the world? This trio of qualities tries to force us to define God in logically inconsistent ways, perhaps precisely for the purpose of authorizing certain beliefs and disqualifying others. But we are free to reject these qualifications. They are simply more ways of telling us what we <u>should</u> believe, when our project here tonight is to think about what we <u>do</u> believe. So let us set them aside, reject any coercion, and try to approach the divine on our own, without any preconceptions or qualifications. People in general tend to believe something. Let's try to figure out what.

If we only had the time, there are hundreds of different Jewish approaches to belief into which we could delve, a rainbow of different possibilities in which we might find something that resonated. Unfortunately, our time is limited, so I will present just a few ideas of different varieties of belief for you to start thinking about. This is not a multiple-choice test, and I am not going to collect your papers at the end. My hope is that these examples will stimulate your thinking, so that you will continue to ponder and perhaps develop your own approach to believing, one that will carry you forward on your particular path, that will add insight and clarity to your life. Because that's really what the Jewish approach to belief should do. So, let's begin.

[2] For more on the difficulties of these three qualities and strategies for escaping from their grip, see Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson's "I Will Be Who I Will Be: A God of Dynamic Becoming," in Rabbi Elliot J. Cosgrove ed. <u>Jewish Theology In Our Time: A New Generation Explores the Foundations & Future of Jewish Belief</u> (Jewish Lights 2010), pp. 3-10.

*'Olam Hesed Yibaneh*[3]

"The world is built from love."

Although these words from Psalm 89 use none of the Bible's many names for the divine, they do outline one kind of belief one could hold about God: that God is the grounding and the sum of all of our transcendent values, all of those immaterial ideals for which human beings will, in defiance of all logic and self-interest, sacrifice their well-being, their possessions, and even their lives to uphold. Love and justice, freedom and equality, truth and kindness – all of these are qualities that speak to selflessness over selfishness, the eternal over the transient, meaning over senselessness. And for many of us, this is where we find God. When Abraham challenges God over the fate of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, he really knows very little about the divine. God called him to leave his home on the strength of a promise and he did, and that promise, to Abraham's heartbreak, has not yet been fulfilled. Yet with all of his doubt and misgivings about God, Abraham at the very least seems to have one strong belief: that God is the very ground of justice. So he states his challenge: "*Ha-lo shofet kol ha-aretz ya'aseh mishpat?* Won't the Judge of all the earth act justly??"[4] For Abraham, it seems, the whole idea of God falls apart if God's essence is not identical with the transcendent value of justice. And even God seems to agree.

The Psalms draw out these values even further and explicitly identifies them with God, as in Psalm 146 which is traditionally recited each morning:

> [God] secures justice for those who are wronged,
> And gives food to the hungry.
> God sets prisoners free;
> God restores sight to the blind;
> God raises up those who are bowed down;
> God loves the righteous;
> God watches over the stranger,
> And gives courage to the orphan and widow,
> But makes the path of the wicked tortuous.[5]

Again, these are not necessarily literal statements about what God does; we do not stand by and wait for God to feed the hungry instead of us. Instead, we can read them as statements about the transcendent values that the very concept of God contains. As theologians such as Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan have argued, we need not assume that God acts out those values on the world from the outside. Instead, when we enact those values, we are acting in ways that we recognize as divine, acting out our destiny as those who embody the image of God. Enacting these transcendent ideals is bringing God into this world.

[3] Psalm 89:3.
[4] Genesis 18:25.
[5] Psalm 146:7-9.

*Ki imcha m'kor hayim, b'orcha nireh or*[6]

"For in You is the Source of life, in Your light we see light."

Another kind of belief is that God is the Source of the universe, the creator of all, and the life force inside everything that exists. In this verse from Psalm 36, this idea is contained in two metaphors: *m'kor ha-ḥayim*, the wellspring of life, and *or ha-ḥayim,* the light of life. The well is one of the most potent images in the Torah, one that conveys to those who live in a dry climate all of the potential and possibility that life can bring. Just as a well brings up water from the depths and makes life possible, so too does God spill into the world the life force that animates the cosmos. When we see life in a leaf, an insect, an animal, and a human being, we are witnessing the pouring out of the Source of all into the myriad vessels of creation. The stars in the heavens and the microbes beneath the sea pulse with this same source of energy; to praise it is to praise life itself.

The second half of the verse brings together light as a physical phenomenon and light as a metaphor for knowledge. If God is the Source of all, then the physical light that we see is a result of the act of creation that poured energy into the universe, embodied in the sun and stars, reflected by the moon, allowing us to see the wonders around us. But God is also the Source of metaphorical light, of enlightenment, our ability to adapt to what we find, to innovate, to learn from our mistakes and to grow in unanticipated ways. The divine light allows us both to see and to understand, and both of these are key to our existence. Although this conception of God is essentially impersonal – an overflowing well of light that spills out into creation – the Source is still something on which we can rely, something we can feel surrounding us, something that we can praise. We can even, as my teacher Rabbi Jacob Staub has written, forge a personal relationship with this impersonal vision of God, a relationship that can nourish and sustain us.[7] Like the rush of water from the well and the shining of the stars, it can soothe our souls.

*V'kol d'mamah dakah yishama*[8]

"A still small voice is heard."

Yet another conception of God sees the divine as a force for change, perhaps contained inside our own souls, that challenges us to take action to make the world other than as it is. This is a vision of an immanent God, the voice of our conscience, that continually awakens us to what is right and pushes us to throw off the barriers of fear or mistrust that keep us from pursuing it. The verse from the Book of Kings is familiar to us from the story of Elijah, who runs from the wrath of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, the royal authorities who have spread terror and slain prophets, trying to deny the truth of the divine. Elijah hides in a cave, but God

[6] Psalm 36:9.
[7] See Jacob Staub, "Building a Personal Relationship with a Nonpersonal God." Originally published in Zeek Magazine, Fall 2010. Now available at https://www.reconstructingjudaism.org/article/building-personal-relationship-nonpersonal-god
[8] After I Kings 19:12, from the High Holiday liturgy in *Un'taneh Tokef*.

demands that he come out and face a terrible wind, and an earthquake, and a fire, yet we are told that God is not in any of these phenomena of nature. After all of these comes the *kol d'mamah dakah*, a paradoxical phrase in the Hebrew meaning "a silent sound." This silent sound is where God is, in the noiseless urge that makes Elijah return and face his fears in pursuit of change.

We see this same kind of God confronting Moses at the burning bush,[9] where, according to the midrash, God speaks to Moses in his father's voice.[10] It is easy to imagine the dialogue between Moses and God taking place entirely inside of Moses's heart, as some commentators indeed see it happening. The still small voice of God demands that Moses go back to Egypt, that he stand up to Pharaoh, that he claim his people and demand their freedom, and Moses… resists. He marshals all of his arguments as to why it is not the right time and he is not the right messenger, why it should be his brother, or anyone else, just not him. And this is a dialogue we know well inside ourselves, as our inner sense of justice pushes against our resistance to listen, insistently pressuring us to act in the way we know we should. What else is this but the voice of God? Later in the Torah we hear that voice explicitly calling to us, "Justice!" And then, when we don't listen, when we throw up excuses and barriers, it calls to us again, "Justice!" And when we still won't listen, the voice won't let us alone but insists on issuing us a final challenge, "Pursue it!" The still small voice within us, the insistent promptings of our conscience and our knowledge of what is right – this, too, is where we can find God.

*Shomer Yisrael, Sh'mor Sh'erit Yisrael v-al Yovad Yisrael ha-omrim Sh'ma Yisrael*

Guardian of the people Israel,
guard the remnant of the people Israel,
and may they not be lost, that people Israel,
who say to each other, "Hear O Israel"[11]

For some, the most compelling vision of God may be as a comforter, a supporter, a friend and guardian, *Shomer Yisrael*, the Guardian of the people Israel. God is called all of these things in the Bible, and God even refers sometimes to human beings like Abraham as "my beloved friend."[12] This is a radical reimagining of the Lord of Creation, the Fashioner of the heavens, as a force that is so close to and so caring of humanity. In the imagination of the Biblical authors, the sufferings of the people touch God deeply, and God continues to be with them through enslavement and servitude, war and exile, wandering and uncertainty. In this vision, strikingly, God does not solve the people's problems. God does not make their oppression disappear, magically eliminate their enemies, or in any other way materially change the conditions under which they labor. It is simply God's presence as one who is concerned for

[9] Exodus 3:4.
[10] Exodus Rabbah 45:5.
[11] This liturgical poem by an unknown author is part of the *Selihot* liturgy and is also said in daily prayer as part of *Tahanun* (supplication) on certain weekdays.
[12] See Isaiah 41:8.

them, who cares about them, and who hears their cries, that makes the people's troubles easier to bear.

In Psalm 121, the psalmist asks, "If I lift my eyes to the heavens, from where will my help come?" And the answer rings back, "My help will come from God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth." But what kind of help does God provide? Does God change the material reality of the suffering psalmist? No. Instead, the psalmist can be assured only of God's continual presence, just as a supportive friend or family member might sit at the foot of their sickbed. "God, the Guardian of the people Israel, will neither slumber nor sleep. God will watch over you, your shelter, at your side." The presence of the divine creates a place of shelter, a refuge in which we can have respite, a place for our bruised hearts to heal. "God will protect you against all evil, protecting your soul." While human forces might guard our bodies, only God can stand watch over our souls, the parts of us that can be shielded from harm even if our bodies falter, the only parts of us that transcend time. "God will guard your going out and your coming home, now and forever." When we go out into the world and expose our vulnerability, God is with us. And when we come home to where we are safe, and when our souls return to the divine at the end of our lives, God is with us there, too, God's right hand holding us fast.[13] Whatever befalls us, the vision of the presence of God as comforter and supporter can make it easier to bear.

I said there would be no multiple-choice test here for you to take, and I meant it. I have sketched here just a few of the myriad Jewish varieties of believing that are out there, and you may know of or discover many more. But I do want to end with a challenge for each of us. I want you to put some time and effort into thinking about what you believe in this new year. As I said at the outset, although Jewish tradition does not prescribe precisely what you should believe, that does not mean that believing is not an important part of living a Jewish life. What we believe can ground us in difficult times, can give us a sense of where we come from and where we are going, can challenge us to act when we are reluctant, and can bring us comfort when we suffer. And I thank God that in the great dance of our belief in God and God's belief in us, all of these and more are possible.

*G'mar hatimah tovah* – with the help of whatever vision of God speaks most clearly to us, may we all be sealed for good in the book of life this year.

[13] Psalm 139:10.