

YK 5771 God and Others  
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Shabbat Shalom. *Gmar Hatimah Tovah.*

Last March, I was at a convention in DC when I received terrible news. My dear friend and rabbinical school classmate's father, Rabbi Zachary Heller, may his memory be blessed, had just died.

The funeral would be in Boston the next day. His son Josh and I were roommates in rabbinical school and have continued our friendship over the years although we have lived in different cities. Josh's father was also a Conservative rabbi, who served for decades in a pulpit in Bayonne, New Jersey before he moved to the Boston area, working at a Jewish policy think-tank at the Hebrew College.

Over the last few years, Rabbi Heller senior and I also became friendly, as I often called upon him to serve on a *beit din*, the religious court that is composed of three observant and knowledgeable rabbis for conversions. We had many good conversations over these years together and I always appreciated his perspectives on Judaism. Josh's father, who had been fighting cancer for years, had sadly finally succumbed.

When I heard the news, I reached out to Josh who, like me, is a rabbi of a lovely congregation, his in suburban Atlanta, with three young children and much busy-ness. I couldn't imagine how, particularly as we were just a week before *Pesah*, he could cope with this loss.

I called him to offer whatever assistance I could as I made arrangements to change my flight plans earlier on that Tuesday. Instead of meeting with Congressman Markey to petition him to work harder to stop Iran from getting a nuclear weapon, I made arrangements to be on an earlier flight so that I could be back in Boston for the funeral.

Luckily the flight was on time, even early, and I drove up to Levine's in Brookline long before the service was to begin. I greeted Josh and his wife, their eight-year-old son and Josh's mother and sister. I looked into Josh's eyes and saw the unbelievable pain and loss; he had lost his father - his teacher - his rabbi.

Josh was pulled in different directions – he had to be a father, a son, a husband, a brother and a rabbi. He was going to offer the central eulogy at his own father's funeral.

In between family and friends who had come to offer condolences, Josh pulled me aside and said, "Whenever I had a tough situation, I would always turn to my father for advice. Like at a moment like this, writing a eulogy for my own father... and I can't ask him anymore...."

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After that moving and intense funeral, where Josh delivered an exquisitely powerful and emotional eulogy for his father, I shifted gears and attended “The Great Debate” between David Wolpe, a Conservative rabbi from Los Angeles, and the famous atheist Christopher Hitchens, author of *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. They presented their perspectives. Hitchens claimed that God doesn’t exist. As proof, he pointed to all the suffering in the world. Where is God? He cited what he considered the nonsensical portions of the Hebrew Bible. He adduced the terrible things that religion has done, the wars it has inspired, scandals in the Catholic Church – and on and on and on.

Wolpe tried to defend the role of both religion and God, using various arguments, but Hitchens with his British accent was a bit wittier. During the Q and A that followed, I asked Hitchens what happened and what existed before the Big Bang? What created the universe? Or if the universe came out of nothing, who created the nothing or the physical laws of the universe? Why do they exist? He dodged my question in front of the 1000 people there.

So I tried again at a smaller reception after the debate where I spoke with him one-on-one. I kept pushing and pushing him about the beginning of the universe and time.

He stated: “We know that mathematicians and physicists have been able to prove that the universe, the Big Bang, suddenly came into existence out of nothing.”

I pushed him some more.

“So then, there was nothing at the beginning of the universe?”

“That’s right.”

“So what was in that nothing.”

“Nothing.”

“Well, where did the nothing come from?”

“Nowhere; it’s unknown.”

I kept pushing and pushing and pushing until he finally said, “I don’t know.”

I replied, “Well, Mr. Hitchens, that ‘I don’t know’ is what many of us desperately search and yearn for; it is what Jews call Adonai – four Hebrew letters: *yod, heh, vav, heh* - which may mean timelessness.”

He smiled.

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I juxtapose these two vignettes because much of my time is spent with these two poles, the personal experiential and the abstract intellectual. On one side are the connections, being with people in times of loss or illness or in times of celebration and other milestones. On the other are learning, thinking, questioning and discussing God, the Universe, our purpose here and how we should live.

This morning I want to explore just how these two parts of one Tuesday connect with each other.

Over the course of this year, every year, individuals in the congregation and some outside of the community call me for an appointment, often to get into a conversation about God, about belief. Usually it's about lack of belief, or their uncertainty about God. Often it's someone who has experienced a terrible loss or a tragedy, such as a death that comes to someone far too young. Or it can be a confluence of events that are difficult to cope with. These conversations invariably turn to questions like: why do bad things happen to good people, why am I suffering, where is God, why do I feel so alone.

Some of these conversations are with teens, though sometimes younger students, even first, second, and third-graders, come in with their parents to discuss their own lack of belief, their difficulty in believing in God.

While the conversation with a second grader is slightly different from one with a teenager or an adult, at the core, they are asking the same questions: Why are we here? Why does the Universe exist? Is there a God? And how do any of these ideas impact on my life?

Our young people are thinking and probing, trying to come to terms with what their logical and rational brains understand about the world, what they have studied in school, what they have gleaned from our society, what they have learned about science and the universe on the one hand and what our tradition espouses on the other.

As someone who desperately strives to synthesize a scientific understanding with a deep spirituality, I try to present these two worlds, not in opposition to each other, but as complementary, each coming to answer a different set of questions.

When the Torah describes how the world was created in six days, its goal is not to teach us a scientific understanding of the Big Bang. But it is like a spotlight zeroing in on the world until it is focused on human beings, the last act of creation God performs before Shabbat. Science comes to understand what is here – not why is it here and how we are supposed to interact with it. Science does not tell us about how we should act, but the Torah does.

Sometimes, these conversations center on feelings of alienation from religion, lacking a connection to prayer or to spiritual experiences. Often the deep underlying issue is not the philosophical questions, but the feelings – the feelings of alienation, feelings of disconnection from the community or from others.

As we contemplate God, sometimes the bigger question is, in fact, our feelings of connection and our emotional state of mind. Sometimes the difference between the believer and the non-believer is in a subtle shift of attitude.

I've seen it in my own life. The space between belief and disbelief is sometimes not that great. My thinking is not that different from when I was eighteen years old and I questioned everything. My rational mind hopefully hasn't deteriorated too much over the intervening decades, but what has changed is my attitude, my sense of hope, the gifts that I have in my life, my connection to my wife, to my children, to my parents, my family and friends, my community and these deepening relationships.

Sometimes when we are teenagers, or even in our twenties, and maybe beyond that, as well as in other moments of life, like after a loss or disconnection, we feel alienated from society, from the community, and from others. We are searching for that connection, and if we don't find it, we feel rejected by others and perhaps we reject others. But we also feel disconnected from God. As the rabbis wrote in the siddur, God is the sum total of humanity's souls – *Adon Kol Haneshamot*; when we feel apart from others, we thus feel separated from God.

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As I've discussed on other years at Yom Kippur, there must be something that lies at the core of the universe. Whether that is the space/time continuum or whether that is "nothing" as Christopher Hitchens said, there is a great mysterious question mark that lies at the core of existence. In Judaism, we call that question mark by the name *Yod-heh-vav-heh* four letters, all originally pronounced as vowels, uttered only by the *Kohein Gadol*, the high priest, only at this very moment, during the middle of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, in the holiest space, the *Kodesh Hakodashim* of the *Beit Hamikdash*, the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum of the Holy Temple, which for many centuries was an empty room.

As we will recite in the Musaf Service this afternoon, the *Kohein Hagadol*, would enter into that room on Yom Kippur with a rope tied around his body. No-one else was allowed to enter. If God forbid something happened to him, they would pull him out. He would enter into the *Kodesh Hakodashim*, the Holy of Holies, and there he would intone God's name, the letters *yod, heh vav heh*.

Many scholars have speculated on how to pronounce that name of God (something tradition instructs us never to do), but most likely, it sounded like a breath. Breathing in and breathing out like the wind itself – the spirit that's contained within us and the spirit outside of us.

That metaphor has always resonated for me powerfully. Every time we breathe, we are breathing in the spirit of the universe, like God's self, and thus that spirit resides within us. As we exhale, we are giving back into the universe that spirit, that divine spark, that spark of eternity that we connect to, that which exists in the deepest corner of who we are. When the *Kohein* would recite that name, all of the Israelites, all of the Jews would immediately bow to the ground in full prostration, a practice that we still do annually, as we will this afternoon during *Musaf* when we reenact those most powerful rituals that took place in the Holy Temple thousands of years ago.

Although the High Priest was alone reciting God's name, he must have felt very connected to the community. First of all, he had the rope so he knew that others were behind him, and he heard everyone falling down. Second, imagine the sound of thousands of people dropping to the ground, as you may have seen in a video of Muslim prayer in Mecca. Then he heard them all say the words *Barukh Shem Kvod Malkhuto LeOlam Vaed* – Praised be the name of the One whose glorious sovereignty is forever and ever.

Even though he was alone in that inner shrine, he was connected to the people. The people were responding. It was a doxology – a back and forth response of holiness, like the way we say the *kedushah* in the *Amidah* in *Shaharit*, and in *Musaf*. These words serve to lift us up to Heaven, transforming us, bringing us to another realm. It was an experience of God's presence and it was an experience in community. It goes without saying that doxologies like the *Kedushah*, or the *Kaddish* for that matter, require a *minyan*, a quorum of ten adult Jews, in other words: community.

The more I think about these issues, the more I realize that God's presence is really about how we feel connected to others and that while God can also be found in moments alone in the desert, alone in nature, in moments of deep private meditation, more often I find God's presence with others: sitting by someone's hospital bed before they have surgery, talking with someone about a loss, holding someone's hand in our circle as we sing *Eliyahu Hanavi* at the end of Shabbat every Saturday night, as a community. As I close my eyes, there is something much more powerful about being with other people, feeling God's presence.

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A Hasidic story:

*Once Rabbi Hayyim of Zans (19th century Galicia) told this parable:*

*A man had been wandering about in a forest for several days unable to find the way out. Finally, he saw a man approaching him in the distance. His heart was filled with joy. "Now I shall surely find the right way out of this forest," he thought to himself. When they neared each other, he asked the man, "Brother, will you please tell me the way out of the forest? I have been wandering about in here for several days and I am unable to find my way out."*

*The other man responded, "Brother, I do not know the way out either, for I too have been wandering about in here for many days. But this much I can tell you. Do not go the way that I have gone, for I know that it is not the way. Now come, let us search for the way out together."*

*The rabbi added: "So it is with us. The one thing that each of us knows is that the way we have been going until now is not the way. Now come, let us join hands and look for the way together." (S. Y. Agnon, Days of Awe, 1948)*

We need each other, we need community, and we need a relationship with the divine. The text of this season that resonates most with me and is filled with God is Psalm 27.

I've always been partial to this Psalm because we begin reciting it on *Rosh Hodesh Elul* (one month before Rosh Hashanah), which is actually the day on which I was born, so I always knew that I had a connection to this Psalm from birth.

But since then, I've always loved its opening lines. A Psalm of David. (There's another connection.)

Adonai is my light and my help;  
Whom should I fear?  
Adonai is the stronghold of my life,  
Whom shall I dread?

It's a powerful opening to a psalm. Clearly the author had a sense of fear and anxiety and was turning to God's light and God's hope and God's power to save and to renew and to rebuild in order to bring him strength. I've used it in times of difficulty in my own life, in times of illness, times of uncertainty, times when I needed strength, and this Psalm has always helped to sustain me.

Let's open up our Mahzor to page 27, where we find this Psalm. I want to take you through some of the key passages.

*(Seven lines down in the Hebrew or the second paragraph in the English)*  
*One thing I ask of Adonai – this I seek: to dwell in the House of God all the days of my life, to behold God's beauty and visit in God's sanctuary.*

What a beautiful statement of yearning for God's presence – longing for God is parallel to our longing for others in our lives. That is what we all want in life: not to be alone, to have meaningful relationships with friends, with family, with partners, with siblings, with parents, with children. We want to be held, taken care of, sheltered in God's love – like the *Shekhinah*, the immanent aspect of God that nurtures and protects us. When we put on a *tallit*, live in the *Sukkah* (which we can do beginning on Wednesday evening) or stand under the *huppah*, the wedding canopy, we are bathed in that sheltering divine love.

The Psalm is filled with the yearning, the desire to feel God's closeness, as we yearn to be with others. There is uncertainty, since we all know that we do not always feel God's love, nor do we always find ourselves connected to others, but the yearning is always there.

(Ten lines from the bottom in English or 6 in the Hebrew)

*Though my father and my mother abandon me, Adonai will gather me in. Show me your way, Adonai, and lead me on a straight path....Horeini Adonai Darkekha...*

I have always been profoundly impacted by that verse. Our parents do leave us, but their spirit and their power continue on, returning to the creator and living on in us. We continue their legacy; we take the wisdom of the past and bring it forward.

After our parents leave, however, we want to continue to be taught and parented – this is a Hebrew pun on the word *Horeini*. *Horeini* means teach me, but it also echoes the word *horim*, parents; thus, the author wants to still be parented by the ultimate Parent, the *Kadosh Barukh Hu*, the Holy Blessed One.

God is the eternal truth that is the foundation of the universe. Once in a while we become so sensitive and open to the divine that we become aware of the God's presence in the world, bringing the Holy One's impact fully into the world. When we do that, we have connected to others and to the wisdom of the past.

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Let me return you to the moments right before Josh's father's funeral. Josh turned to me and in a deep moment of connection, he asked me for a favor. Handing me the eulogy that he had written for his father, he asked me to read it over for him. I was deeply moved and honored to be taking on a task that his father used to assume for him, and I sat down to read what he had written. After I did, I handed it back to him and told him how perfect it was, how he managed to bring his father's presence to life again through his words, and how honored I was to be able to be present with him during this difficult time...and I hugged him.

It was a moment infused with God's Presence; right in that space between the two of us, in that hug, God's sustaining love was right there in that moment between Josh and me. God's presence can fill almost any moment when we allow the Divine to enter into that space between two people.

In the end, the more significant, the more powerful question is not whether or not God exists, not the philosophical debates between Christopher Hitchens and David Wolpe. The real power of God is how we let God into the space, into the world, into our feelings, into our heart and into our souls so it can influence our relationships with others. That is where God's presence is to be found. As Psalm 27 concludes:

*If only I could trust that I would see God's goodness in the land of the living...  
Place your hope in Adonai.  
Be strong, take courage, and place your hope in Adonai.  
God's presence is to be found there.*

In this realm, the realm of the living – it is how we live with others and how we connect with others and how we bring God's spirit into all of our relationships that is most vital.

As we now approach the most sacred time of Yizkor and realize that there are so many that we love who are no longer with us, we know that our relationships with them continue to transform us and their souls continue on in us and can deepen our relationships with all those around us.

May God's presence continue to fill all our relationships, and let us say: Amen.