

YK 5769 What Is God and What Does It Matter?

Gmar Hatimah Tovah – may you be sealed for a good year.

I still remember this nightmare from my childhood, although it was not really a nightmare. It was more of an unsettling awareness that occurred on a number of occasions. The first time it happened I must have been about ten years old and I was lying in bed, my mind racing. I was thinking about God.

Maybe it was not such an unusual topic for the son of a Conservative rabbi and a Jewish Theological Seminary professor who attended day school and liked to think about things, but the truth is most of my psychic energy was taken up by sports – following them, playing them and worrying about them.

But on this particular night, sports was not in the mix, as I found myself lying in a cold sweat, almost shaking with a fear I can now call existential. I understood that God created the world, but I was plagued by going one more step back. This next question grated at my soul – it was so disturbing that it was literally keeping me up at night – and I'm a pretty good sleeper. The question was and maybe still is: If God created the world, then Who created God?"

Or to sharpen this dilemma, as I have over the years: the fact that I exist makes no sense. Why is there a universe? Why is there a God or an Initiator to this world?

There should be neither a universe, nor God for that matter. The fact that all of us are sitting here this morning makes no sense, it is illogical.

Why should the universe exist? And if God created all this, who created God? Did God suddenly appear out of nothing – like spontaneous generation?

Who is God and why does it matter?

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Over the past couple of years, there has been a strong movement against believing in God. Atheism seems to be ascendant, at least in certain American intellectual circles.

In the last few years a number of books have aggressively taken on God including Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*; Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great*; and Sam Harris' *The End of Faith*.

These books make the strong case that science has all the answers and there is no reason why God should exist. God is simply unnecessary.

While I appreciate their take on reason, their certainty is unsettling. Proving God's existence or lack of existence is no simple matter either way. I appreciate a healthy dose of humility when approaching these topics.

To talk about God is to ask questions, is to be unsure. While our spiritual ancestors in the Tanakh may have felt God's presence in a direct sense, for most of us today, God is less direct. If we do believe in God or sense God, it does not feel the same as God speaking to Noah and telling him to build an ark....

Like some of you, I am filled with doubts, with questions, doubts that have been shared by many including deeply religious people from the great Hasidic master Rebbe Nahman of Bratslav to Mother Theresa.

As I look back over my thinking, I can see how my understanding evolved. While I was taught a great deal about God as child, hence my nightmare, I rejected some of that as a teen. For me, the God I was taught in my liberal Orthodox high school seemed like a fairy godmother. The message was explicit when we studied the three parts of our central prayer, the weekday *Amidah*: praise, petition and thanksgiving. My teacher explained that it is like asking your parent for something. First you go to them and say something nice, like, "Dad, you're a really awesome father and I love you." And then ask them, "Would you mind if I borrowed the car tonight?" and then you say, "Thanks Dad, you're the best."

This understanding of God as the parent with the car was logical, but did not reflect the reality of the world as I saw it, even as a teen. There were clearly many people who were moral and ethical, potentially even pious, who praised God and asked for prosperity, healing or merely not to be killed in the Shoah and God did not seem to give them the car

As a teen, I was unsure about God and certainly not into praying to God. That seemed like a colossal waste of time. I once went to talk with one of my high school teachers, Rabbi Beiler about my lack of faith and my inability to pray. He surprised me by saying that he understood and that some people are simply unable to pray and may be I was one of those people. At the time, I took great comfort in this – I was OK, I merely had a condition: I was unable to pray and that's that. Maybe I could have a free period during services.....

But my questions about God and prayer never stopped.

In college, I took a physics for poets course with Professor David Helfand entitled: "Astronomy, Geology and Physics: an Introduction to the Scientific Habits of Mind" where we explored the origin of the universe. It was an amazing class as he explained what the universe was like during the first nanosecond.

The entire universe was condensed into the space of one less than one electron with an unbelievably high density, temperature and potential energy. From that tiny

point, the universe exploded into being some 15 billion years ago and it continues to expand.

Professor Helfand went on to explain that at that micro level – where the size is astronomically small and the energy so high, space and time can almost cross. See – and this is only for the 20 or so of you who are not engineers – there are four dimensions in the world: the three dimensions of space with which we are all familiar and the fourth is time. This is called the space-time continuum, the bedrock of all existence and our four-dimensional universe.

Helfand continued to explain that the universe may have come into being with no causation. As he said, “it was a glitch in the space-time continuum, a hiccup.” Totally accidental.

Helfand had seemingly written the Creator out of God’s Big Bang moment. After a few students clarified this with their questions, I raised my hand and asked “Professor Helfand, who created the space-time continuum?”

Helfand paused and said no one; it always existed, as far as he knew.

Oh. ...

I was left with the same uncertainty I had at age ten, just in different words, why is there a space-time continuum?

Who created it?

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While there are many texts in our tradition that discuss God, I like to begin with Moshe at the Burning Bush. You remember the scene: Moshe is tending his father-in-law’s flock when an angel of God appears to him from a burning bush that was not consumed. Moshe is called by God to take the Israelites out of Egypt and then he asks a question. (Exodus 3: 13-15)

“Moses said to God, “When I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is His name?’ what shall I say to them?” And God said to Moses, “Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh.” He continued, “Thus shall you say to the Israelites, ‘Ehyeh sent me to you.’” And God said further to Moses, “ Thus shall you speak to the Israelites: Adonai, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you:

*This shall be My name forever,
This My appellation for my eternity.”*

God's name is of particular interest to me. Moshe needs to know God's name. A name is how we human beings identify things; we name them or learn their names. To know God's name is to know something about God; to know something about why we are here.

God answers with the name: "*Ehyeh asher Ehyeh* – I will be what I will be" or smoothing out the English: "I am what I am." *Ehyeh* is related to God's name *Yod Heh Vav Heh* – which is the same root in Hebrew as the verb: "*Lihiyot* – To be." God says that God's name is Existence. Or maybe to update it for today, God is the space-time continuum. God is the very fabric of the universe.

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But if that is so, how can we relate to Existence itself? If God lies beyond and behind our four-dimensional universe, what good is to us? If God is so mysterious – the Ultimate Unknowable Unanswerable Question, then how could this Divine force have any impact on our lives? Or in other words: if God is the space-time continuum or the Creator of this space-time continuum, then God lies in another realm far beyond us, who are limited by this four-dimensional world we inhabit.

But it would make no sense that God would create a world or allow the world to explode into existence without a purpose. What does *Ehyeh* want? Does *Adonai* want anything to do with us?

Abraham Joshua Heschel explored these questions most masterfully in his book *God in Search of Man*. He suggests that God created the world in order to come into contact with humanity.

According to the Kabbalah, God performed *tzimtzum*, an act of contraction to make room for the physical universe. Since it is made up of matter, the universe is inherently imperfect and broken and thus, needs humans' participation in repairing it – what the Kabbalists called: *tikkun olam*. Through our performance of *mitzvot* and *hesed* – acts of loving kindness – we heal the world and come to know God, completing the circle back to God, who is eternity itself.

Understanding God in a more limited manner is not a new idea; the Jewish philosopher Gersonides some 700 years ago claimed that God does not know future contingencies – meaning, God does not know what the future holds or how humans will act. If God did, then we would not have free will. For humans to have free will means that no one knows what we will choose. Maybe God, like a supercomputer knows the odds, but not exactly what will happen. Randomness is part of the world.

In this same vein, living after the Holocaust, it seems clear that God does not intervene in the physical world.

So what does God do? How does God act?

According to the Kabbalah, when the world came into being, sparks of the divine, shards of holy light, spread into everything. Thus, God can be found in everything and everyone and every time, we merely need to open ourselves up to that divine energy.

At certain times, some people have been able to become aware of God's presence like Moshe at the bush and then they bring God and Godliness into the world.

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Given this understanding of God, how can we relate to God? First, we can appreciate that we yearn to find those sparks, to return to our creator, our metaphysical parent. Simply in reaching out to find God is the beginning of the process of relating to God. We yearn to feel God's presence or in the words of psalm 27: *Shivti b'veit Adonai kol yimei hayyei, lahozot b'noam Adonai u'l'vakeir be'heikhalo* – to dwell in God's abode all the days of our lives, to gaze upon God's pleasantness and to visit God's *heikhal* – God's inner sanctuary. That's what we yearn for – to find those sparks inside our deepest selves and outside of us, to feel them and to bring them together, creating more wholeness and healing in the world.

Of course, there are many ways to achieve this and they differ for different people and at different moments in our day or different phases of our lives.

For some, this can be achieved through *hesed* – acts of love and helping others brings us into contact with the Divine. For others, it is learning. Discovering the beauty of our world – be it through science, art, or Judaism – studying texts can add to our sense of awe and wonder. For others, it is through physical experiences – seeing a wondrous sunrise, hearing a moving concert, running a marathon, smelling a bouquet of roses or tasting an exquisite dessert. And for others, it is in found in prayer.

Prayer is not about a *quid pro quo* – not the wheedling child that my high school teacher described – as much as it is about honing our senses, exercising our spiritual muscles whose task is to help us become aware of the awe and wonder that pervades the universe, helping us sense those sparks of eternity embedded in everything and in everyone.

Tefillah, Jewish prayer is an attempt to connect us with the Divine, who lies beyond all we can sense. *Tefillah* wants us to feel something or help us with a feeling we are already having. If we are scared or anxious, prayer tries to calm us down. If we are sad or depressed, our liturgy can lift us up, filling us with hope and optimism. If we are filled with hubris, the *siddur* returns us to a state of humility. If we are happy, *tefillah* heightens the moment. If we are not fully experiencing the world around us, these words are supposed to help us become more aware and more appreciative. *Tefillah* develops a sense of gratitude and humility.

Last October, I gave a lecture that seemed to strike a chord with many of you entitled: “How Can You Pray If You Do Not Believe In God?”

As I did this morning, I explained that I do not conceive of God in the way previous generations did. Nonetheless, while God is beyond my complete comprehension, I can relate to God on three levels.

First, instead of vertical metaphor with God up above us, maybe judging us as we will describe in the *Unetane tokef*, perhaps we should go back to the divine sparks, realizing that God is within us. Prayer works well with this notion, since the Hebrew word *lehitpalel* literally means to judge one’s self. To pray is to look inside as we do on these high holy days and see what’s going on. Introspection is at the root of the prayer experience. Morning, noon and night we are asked to check in and see how we are doing and make the necessary course corrections. God and prayer help us get in touch with our deepest feelings and find our soul’s yearnings.

But beyond the self, prayer opens us up to God Who is all around us. As we recite in the *Kedushah*, our holiest prayer: *Kadosh, Kadosh, Kadosh, Adonai Tzvaot Melo Khol Ha-aretz kvodo* – holy, holy, holy is *Adonai Tzvaot*, God’s Presence fills the earth. When we pray we open our eyes to that sense of wonder.

Think of a child tasting a new food for the first time – that sense of amazement in his eyes. As we get older we lose that, but prayer and blessings remind us to find that child-like wonderment. Whether it is the liturgy composed by previous generations or the spontaneous yearnings of our own souls, that feeling is one that we all need ... and have largely ignored in our modern world.

Finally, *tefillah* is all about finding God in others. One of the basic goals of Jewish prayer is to move us beyond ourselves. While we start each day thinking about our own needs, the morning prayers remind us that there is a world full of other people in need and we must remember them as well. Our *siddur* stresses this through prayers that speak about humility and compassion. The need for a *minyan* to recite certain prayers like the *kaddish* also speaks to the communal element that connects us with others in prayer.

The shift from the self to the other is found throughout our liturgy. Think about how the rabbis wrote the simple formula of a *brakhah*, a blessing. *Barukh Ata* – Praised are you – it begins with the self communicating with God and eternity and feeling how wonderful it is. Then it names God in community – *Adonai Eloheinu*; for us, as Jews, we relate to God in community with our particular perspective and approach. But the *brakhah* formula continues *Melekh Haolam* – ruler of the universe. We do not stop with our people, but remind ourselves of our link to all humanity.

Six simple Hebrew words and three ways to connect to God – self, our community and all humanity. And most importantly, a movement from the self outward to others.

That is the thrust of prayer – taking us outside ourselves and into relationship with others. And in relationship with others we can find God.

One of my favorite teachings that I have shared with you comes from Emanuel Levinas, one of the greatest Jewish philosophers of the 20th century. He expresses this idea using the example of the altar in the Holy of Holies – in the holy Temple in Jerusalem which was only entered today on Yom Kippur by the *Kohein Gadol*, the High Priest. Above the ark there were two cherubs, two angelic creatures with human faces looking at each other. According to our tradition, God dwelled in the space between them.

Building on that metaphor, Levinas reminds us that God is found in that moment of connection, when two human beings truly see each other's faces, lovingly reaching out to each other with that sense of divine compassion. In that special moment of connection when two people look into each other's eyes, we can sense God's presence.

Sharing *tefillah* reminds us of just that possibility. Holding someone's hands during an illness and reciting a prayer for their health may or may not heal them, but the feeling of God's presence in that moment can be palpable.

While I know that something initiated the universe, I am not moved by that knowledge. But I can sense God in the place between two people. Sometimes sitting beside someone in the hospital, standing under the *huppah* with a couple, visiting in a *shiva* home or simply having an intense conversation in my office – those are moments that I feel God's presence.

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I want to take you back to that sleepless childhood night. I called for my mother and she decided that she was going to pass on the question of who created God. With a rabbi in the house, it was his turn. So my father came in and I explained to him my concern. He said that God always existed. In essence, God created God. He added that he struggled with the same questions and ultimately made his peace with that approach. At the time, I am not sure I could fully appreciate his answer, but over the years I have come to the same conclusion.

God, faith and prayer pick up at the question mark behind science and reason. The space-time continuum might be the reality we can perceive, but why the reality came into being, how can it be changed and sensing the awesomeness around us is the stuff of God.

My dad hugged and kissed me and told me not to worry. I looked into his eyes and sensed his love and compassion and it was as if God showed up right between us.

May we always be able to sense God and find ways to open our souls up to the mysteries of eternity.

Amen.