

**KOL NIDREI 5777/2016**  
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**GOD TALK**

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Dear Friends:

These sure are interesting times - and, if you are like me, I know that you are as eager as I am to put them behind us. But as a rabbi in the season of confession, allow me to make one of my own. I am in awe of this particular Day of Awe, for perhaps never before has there been such an abundance of things to talk about on a single Yom Kippur - lying, infidelity, misogyny, racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, assault, approval of torture, incitement to violence, narcissism. It is, as the alphabetical acrostic that is our *Vidui* suggests, an alphabet of woe. *Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu* - as if to say that the sins before us run the gamut from A to Z.

Truly there is no shortage of subjects this year which need addressing - conduct that is beyond the realm of *Menschlichkeit* and antithetical to the values of our tradition, But that is not what I want to talk about tonight, save to say that they call to mind a central lesson of this day: that everything we do, everything we say somehow is recorded; and that somehow, someday, in some way we may be called to account for our deeds and our words.

No, tonight, I'd like to leave the realm we call *bein Adam lachavero* - the realm between us humans - and enter the one we call *bein Adam lamakom* -- the realm between the individual and the Holy One. Ironically, as much as God is very much a personality throughout the Torah - walking about in the Garden of Eden, cutting a deal with Abraham, shining light on Moses, burying Korach in an earthquake, and dwelling amidst the people in the Tabernacle - God is not a topic we're altogether comfortable discussing.

We moderns tend to be more at home with certainty than with conjecture. We tend to prefer the observable to the ineffable. We feel more comfortable, perhaps, inhabiting a binary world of zeroes and ones than one of infinite possibilities offered by the spiritual imagination.

And yet, ever since Abraham argued with God and Jacob wrestled with him, ours has been what the author Amos Oz calls “a people of arguments” or what Arthur Waskow calls a people of God-wrestlers. For our tradition, overflowing as it is with mitzvot governing human behavior, is quite sparing when it comes to instructing us about theology and belief. Pretty much all the Torah supplies are six words found in the sixth chapter of its last book: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. And even that formulation is mysterious.

Entire books have been written, and indeed still are being written, about the Tetragrammaton, the four letter name for God, and what it tells us. Is it a personal name? Does it mean the Lord? The Eternal? Hu/Hi, or He/she, as Rabbi Mark Sameth is now suggesting by reading Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh backwards? Or is it more about all that is, past, present and future, which we can derive by reducing the word linguistically? And what of the syntax of the entire verse? The Torah being devoid of any punctuation, should we interpolate a colon and two periods into the phrase so as to read: “Listen everyone: Adonai is Our God. Adonai is One?” Or is it more accurate to stick to the translation of yore, “Hear O Israel The Lord Our God The Lord is One?” And what of the word God itself, *Elohim*, or the declined form here, *Eloheinu*, our God?

On this night to recite the *Vidui*, allow me to make another confession. This is the time of year when the God-language of our machzor pushes my limits, and sometimes my buttons. For the machzor we have inherited embodies a God-idea that I find is often outside the boundaries of my theological territory.

The God in our machzor, you see, reflects a certain conception of God as understood by sages from late antiquity and the High Middle Ages. Their God is *Avinu Malkeinu*, Father and King, all-knowing, all-seeing, and all-powerful. Their God is *El Rachum V'chanun* - Merciful and Forgiving. Their God is the character many of us envisioned as kids: tall, with a big white beard, sitting on a throne on High, the King of Kings. Their God is what theologians would call a Transcendent God: majestic, powerful and awesome, but also separate and far removed from the realm of human existence.

To be sure, we can have a relationship with this God, and indeed many of us do. The God to whom I am drawn, however, is more mysterious and elusive - a presence that is unfathomable, out of reach, and yet unifies all existence. It is what the mystics call "Ain Sof," "the primordial boundless, endless source of all existence" which "[l]ike love or gravity . . . undergirds everything and [whose] manifestations are all around us all the time, but can't be apprehend[ed] directly."<sup>1</sup>

For much of the last year, a large portion of the country, especially millennials, were utterly captivated by Bernie Sanders' call for a political revolution to overturn the existing system of pay-to-play and dark money governance by special interests. I would argue that what we Jews need, and indeed what is already beginning to take place in our synagogues, is a liturgical revolution. As a colleague of mine wrote recently, "Our prayer books have to be rewritten to indicate that we are not calling on God to intervene. Prayer should not be for the purpose of getting God to change God's mind and do what we want; it should be for the purpose of getting us to discern what is God's will and for us to do what we believe God wants. In other words prayer is for the purpose of changing us, not God. It is time we stop using the excuse that our prayer book is poetry and begin to write

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<sup>1</sup> Brent Chaim Spodek, "I (don't) believe in God," *The Times of Israel* (blog), July 13, 2016.

prayers that truly make sense, that are rational and express what we believe.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, this is a principal reason that we use a prayer supplement. It allows us to pray in a way that hopefully reflects how I, and perhaps you also, understand the holy, ineffable One, the Source of Life.

Of the idea of what theologians might call an Immanent God, Lawrence Kushner writes “we are *within* God; we are one with God. God is everywhere and everything. All being derives its reality from God.” According to this paradigm, says Kushner, “[I]f God is within all creation, then what *appears* as evil can only be a distant, albeit distorted, expression of the divine. This doesn’t make it ‘good.’ But nothing can be entirely separate from or independent of God. Everything, therefore, is the way it is ‘supposed’ to be.”<sup>3</sup>

Kushner illustrates this idea of God with the following story:

About seventeen years ago, as was our family’s custom back in the days when the children were young, we would all go out for dinner at Burger King. (For us, in those years, it qualified as “dinner at a restaurant.”) On the way home, if we had a little time and a little money, we might stop at Marshall’s, a discount clothing store. The kids would play hide-and-seek among the racks of clothing and Karen and I would browse for bargains.

On one such evening I caught a glimpse of a tall, carefully made-up, attractive woman out of the corner of my eye. She seemed, even at first glance, to be distraught. Pretending not to notice her as she moved into the aisle where I stood, I saw that she was very pregnant and accompanied by a man. They were discreetly moving toward me

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<sup>2</sup> Comment in HUCAIum Digest, Aug. 22, 2016 (emphasis added).

<sup>3</sup> From Lawrence Kushner, “Act of God” in *Invisible Lines of Connection*, Jewish Lights Publishing, p. 138.

and she was trying to catch my eye. But even if she did, I would have feigned ignorance. Yes, I know, I'm a rabbi, a public person, but, gimme a break, this public person happens to be shopping for clothes.

It didn't work. She was closing in and moving through the right fluorescent lights and Muzak like a guided missile.

“Aren't you Rabbi Kushner?”

I could lie. But instead I answered, “Yes I am. Have we met?”

“Not exactly, we attended a service you did. My husband and I thought you were very nice.”

But before I could even acknowledge her compliment, she moved in for the kill.

“Oh Rabbi, we were at the doctor's this afternoon. The third opinion. He says I have an inoperable tumor. I'm going to die. He says that the baby will be fine,” she added holding her belly, “but I've only got six months at the most.”

Her husband was trying to look strong, but his eyes seemed abnormally red.

“Oh, my God! I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do?”

(Stupid question. “Sure, a miracle maybe - right between sweaters and men's slacks. Nothing big, mind you, just let her live to see her kid grow up.” Something like that.)

“Hey dad, could I buy the T-shirt with a picture of Superman on it?”

“Not now, son. Go find Mom. I have to talk to these people. It's important.”

They introduced themselves, gave me the details. They'd been thinking about joining my congregation. Their world had collapsed. Why has this happened? Would I do the funeral?

They joined.  
She bore a daughter.  
She died.  
I did the funeral

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Not long ago, I was sitting with the other members of my synagogue's high school faculty over a Monday night pizza supper. We were surveying the students. Even after a long day of school, their energy astonished us. My glance settled on a short, vivacious, red haired girl of seventeen. I pretended I was not looking; I did not mean to intrude on their fun. She had just finished telling a joke or playing some kind of prank. Her face had a grin as irrepressible as the sunrise. Everyone laughed with her. She is popular. The group erupted with joy. A few minutes later, she came over to our table and asked if I would read over a creative worship service she had written for an upcoming youth conclave.

“Why not? I need a good laugh,” I said with a wink.

I love that girl. I'm honored she looks up to me. That girl's father never did remarry.

“Last week,” I whisper to another teacher, “her dad told me that his daughter was thinking of becoming a rabbi.”

Look, I don't think God made a tumor grow in that girl's mother's brain or that God had anything to do with the choice of careers or where I used to shop for bargain basement clothes. But I can't get it out of my mind that somehow God is mixed up in this whole horrible, holy and joyous goddamn thing.<sup>4</sup>

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How I wish I heard this story when I was a teenager! Instead, the God-idea I absorbed was the God of the classical Rabbis, the God of Antiquity and the Middle Ages, the God Who each year authored a Book of Life and a Book of Death, Who demanded faithfulness of his people and yet was heartbreakingly silent outside the ghettos and charnel houses. Such was my understanding back then of the God of Israel, an understanding which engendered sadness and anger. That Psalmist who shakes his hand at God, demanding to know, “Why have you forsaken me?” - he could have been the teenage me.

Today I am older and perhaps a little wiser. Today I am able to view much of our liturgy as metaphor and poetry, pliable and capable of being given new meaning,

And still - still I worry about the underlying worldview, a worldview of master and servant, king and subject, shepherd and flock, keeper and vineyard. What will the next generation of our children think when they hear this? Will they embrace? Will they flee? Will they rebel? Will they wrestle?

Last week I was viewing Facebook when I came across a post that stopped me cold. “Freakin useless *Mishebeirach*,” it said. Immediately I understood.

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<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, pp. 136-39.

Here again was that Psalmist crying out. For maybe the *Mishebeirach* won't assure that God will cure my friend's little girl of Stage 4 Rhabdomyosarcoma. Maybe my friend is right to feel angry at a situation that neither he, his wife, nor his two children deserve: a world turned upside down.

And yet, I must ask, can it not bring out the God within each of us - the Godly energy channelling out of our souls that yearns for her healing and wholeness and comfort? What if instead of God being a personality, an object, a kind of matter - what if instead we see God as energy, as healing, as hope, and as kindness? What if, as Rabbi Jeffrey Summit puts it, "God didn't create us but instead it's our job to create God in the world?"<sup>5</sup>

Rabbi Summit, my rabbi and friend at Tufts Hillel, reminded me of the following story. Perhaps you've heard it before (though probably in its more secular form).

Brooklyn, New York

At a fundraising dinner for the school his learning-disabled son attends, a father addressed the gathering. He began by extolling the school and its dedicated staff, but then, alluding to the verse of Torah declaring "*Ha-Tsur tamim po-olo* - The Rock, His work is perfect." - he cried out in anguish, "Where is the perfection in my son Shaya? Everything that Hashem does is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do. My child cannot remember facts and figures as other children do. Where is Hashem's perfection?" The audience was shocked by the question, pained by the father's anguish and stilled by his piercing query.

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<sup>5</sup>Rabbi Jeffrey Summit, Kol Nidre Sermon, October 8, 2008/5769.

Yet the father has not come to question or complain about defective merchandise.<sup>6</sup>

"I believe," the father answered, "that when Hashem brings a child like this into the world, the perfection that He seeks is in the way people react to this child."

Then he told the following story:

Shaya and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shaya knew were playing baseball. Shaya asked, 'Do you think they'll let me play?' Shaya's father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shaya on their team, but the father also understood that if his son were allowed to play, it would give him a much-needed sense of belonging and some confidence to be accepted by others in spite of his handicaps.

Shaya's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked (not expecting much) if Shaya could play. The boy looked around for guidance and said, 'We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning.'

Shaya struggled over to the team's bench and, with a broad smile, put on a team shirt . His father watched with a small tear in his eye and warmth in his heart. The boys saw the father's joy at his son being accepted. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shaya's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shaya put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands. In the bottom of the ninth inning,

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<sup>6</sup> *Id.*

Shaya's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shaya was scheduled to be next at bat.

At this juncture, do they let Shaya bat and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shaya was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shaya didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball.

However, as Shaya stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing that the other team was putting winning aside for this moment in Shaya's life, moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shaya could at least make contact. The first pitch came and Shaya swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shaya. As the pitch came in, Shaya swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher.

The game would now be over. The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shaya would have been out and that would have been the end of the game.

Instead, the pitcher threw the ball right over the first baseman's head, out of reach of all team mates. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, 'Shaya, run to first! Run to first!' Never in his life had Shaya ever run that far, but he made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled.

Everyone yelled, 'Run to second, run to second!' Catching his breath, Shaya awkwardly ran towards second, gleaming and struggling to make it to the base. By the time Shaya rounded towards second base, the right fielder had the ball, the smallest guy on their team who now had his first chance to be the hero for his team. He could have

thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions so he, too, intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head. Shaya ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home.

All were screaming, 'Shaya, Shaya, Shaya, all the way Shaya!'

Shaya reached third base because the opposing shortstop ran to help him by turning him in the direction of third base, and shouted, 'Run to third! Shaya, run to third!'

As Shaya rounded third, the boys from both teams, and the spectators, were on their feet screaming, 'Shaya, run home! Run home!' Shaya ran home, stepped on home plate and all 18 boys lifted him on their shoulders and made him the hero, as he had just hit the "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

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"That day," said the father who now had tears rolling down his face, "those 18 boys reached their level of perfection. They showed that it is not only those who are talented that should be recognized, but also those who have less talent. They too are human beings, they too have feelings and emotions, they too are people, they too want to feel important."<sup>7</sup>

That day, those 18 boys united in a way that manifested God's presence in the world.

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<sup>7</sup> The story quoted above is "Perfection at the Plate," a work of Rabbi Paysach Krohn which appeared in his 1999 book, *Echoes of the Maggid*.

According to a survey taken half a decade or so ago, 83 percent of Jews say they believe in God. That is a good thing, for God allows us to channel our faith, our struggles, our aspirations, our desire for transcendent meaning, our search for holiness. God allows us to cultivate a sense of mystery and wonder and awe and gratitude, all of which are important for attaining a sense of contentment, purpose, and peace. Yet just what God is, remains, and probably forever shall remain, in our tradition a mystery open to inquiry, interpretation, and struggle.

And so, whatever your understanding of God is - whatever your experience of God is - immanent, transcendent, mystical or questionable - I pray that you will be sealed well in the Book of Life, for a good and a sweet year.

And the most powerful way I know to say that is this:<sup>8</sup>

*Yivarechecha Adonai V'yishmerecha.*

May God bless you and watch over you.

*Ya'er Adonai panav eleicha vichuneka*

May God's face shine upon you. May God be gracious to you.

*Yisa Adonai panav eleicha veh yasem lecha shalom*

May God's countenance shine upon you. May God grant you shalom and shleimut,

wholeness and peace.

*Ken y'hi ratzon.*

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<sup>8</sup> With gratitude to Rabbi Mari Chernow for inspiring this meaningful conclusion.