

Faithfully Perplexed Rosh HaShanah Morning 5779

On his first visit to Jerusalem, a tourist went immediately to the Western Wall and was amazed at the sight of hundreds of people praying. He was particularly drawn to a man who was praying with tremendous passion: rocking back and forth, his head bobbing up and down, chanting prayer after prayer. After a while the tourist asked the man, “Excuse me, this is my first visit here. I’m really impressed with the way you pray. I wish I knew how to pray with such intensity. Please tell me, does God answer your prayers?” The man looked at the tourist with soulful and sad eyes. He shook his head and said, “What, God answer me? Ha. It’s like talking to a Wall!”

During the next few weeks we’ll come together for prayer and sincere reflection. Even those who are not in the regular habit of praying find their way to synagogues during these High Holy Days, *Yamim Noraim*, Days of Awe. Together, we’ll confess to God, make supplications to God, and sing praises to God. So, it’s only natural, that we would like to have some tangible feedback from God.

Our human inclination is to control our environment. We humans, *homo sapiens*, saddled with very modest physical skills, nevertheless have

come to dominate the world. We are relatively slow, we can't fly, our eyesight and hearing and strength all pale in comparison with other creatures. Through the extraordinary gift of language, we have been able to organize, memorize, calculate and create like no other being. Some, like the bestselling historian and social visionary Yuval Harari, project that with the advancements of medicine and technology, the evolving destiny of humanity is to become almost *homo deus*, godlike. What need is there of God when we are like gods? Again and again in his important but provocative works, Harari writes that "God is dead." As an historian and an empiricist, he believes in only what he can see and examine. Since there is no identifiable organ in the body that is the soul, he concludes that there is no soul. And since telescopes scanning the heavens cannot identify a being that seems like God, well, then there is no God. But instead of a triumph of humanity, even Harari imagines such a future as bleak and lonely.

About 145 years ago, another thinker wrote that "God is dead." Nietzsche followed his observation, which criticized the coarsening of society and the loss of morality, with another stark prediction, that the death of God and faith would give rise to "barbaric nationalistic brotherhoods" that would lead within a generation to "wars such as never have been fought

before.” Four decades after he made that prediction, WWI broke out, followed shortly by WWII and the Holocaust, perpetrated by Nietzsche’s own *landsman* in Germany.

The laments by famous atheists like Nietzsche and now Harari are that a world of just humankind, an existence without God, is in no manner superior or even desirable. As the American philosopher William Pepperell Montague wrote:

If God is not, then the existence of all that is beautiful and good, is but the accidental by-product of blindly swirling atoms.... A man may believe that this dreadful thing is true. But only the fool will say in his heart that he is glad that it is true. For to wish either is to wish that the things which we love and strive to realize and make permanent, should be only temporary and doomed to frustration and destruction.

(Belief Unbound)

We sense that there is something more; we pray that there is something more; we hope that there is a reason and a purpose for our existence, that we are in relationship with the Creator of all life. But still there is doubt. Still, there is perplexity.

Early humans satisfied their craving to see, feel and hear God by creating statues to which they’d pay homage. Or they’d dress up shamans

who wore deity masks to deliver oracles that were taken as divine revelations. Others sought God through all manner of activities: dances and trances, fasts or feasts, celibate restraint or orgiastic debaucheries. People saw God in just about every form imaginable: trees, mountains, rivers and seas, the wind, the sun, moon and stars, all resonated with a divine spirit. Harvard professor James Kugel reviews the evolution of our human search for and perception of God in his magisterial new book [The Great Shift](#). Early humans seemed to be quite open to and at ease with a world filled with a spiritual dimension. But this also made them susceptible to superstition and to being manipulated by charlatans.

Our Jewish ancestors began a theological revolution against the idolatrous abuses. They initiated a great shift to a monotheistic belief where God was the unifying One of all life and not just one among many. No longer was God a manipulatable thing or a hometown deity in competition against other deities, the champion of one people against others. Now, God was the universal One to which all could connect but none could see. And therein lies the rub. How can we truly connect with a God that is beyond our senses?

I'm also aware that many very thoughtful people reject the idea of a supernatural God who sits in judgement, rewarding the good boys and

girls, punishing those who deserve it, but often seems to miss the mark and causes the wrong ones to suffer. Yes, a lot of thoughtful people reject the notion of God as an anthropomorphic being stationed somewhere in a place called heaven who controls natural and human events. A God who, if you're really, really good, will even allow your football team to win on Sundays. Apparently, that God hates Cleveland, loves New England and runs hot and cold toward the Broncos.

Yes, there are a lot of very thoughtful people who reject the idea of God who is manipulated by prayers or appeased with sacrifices. A lot of very thoughtful people reject the idea that God gets angry, gets jealous, or displays any other human emotion. Indeed, except for the most fundamentalist minded Ultra-Orthodox Jews, mainstream Judaism also rejects the notion of God as a being in the sky. The problem we have is that too many of those who reject the theological nonsense of fundamentalists fail to pursue more sophisticated theology. As Robert Musil put it: "We do not have too much intellect and too little soul, but too little intellect in matters of the soul."

From its inception, Judaism rejected the idea of God as a thing or a person. Starting with the inspired wisdom recorded in the Torah, our people's first conception of God was iconoclastic. We rejected any attempt

to construct an image of God. The Jewish theology of monotheism was so revolutionary that other civilizations, notably the Greeks, thought we were atheists because we prayed to no image and our God could not be seen in heaven or earth.

And yet, in the Torah and throughout our prayerbook, we find countless passages that refer to God in human terms. God is referred to as a King or Ruler. God looks, walks, talks, writes in the book of life and extends a mighty and outstretched arm in acts of punishment or salvation. These descriptions seem primitive and, indeed, they are quite old. But it's not their age that lend these anthropomorphic descriptions gravitas and spiritual weight. Rather, they are simply easy ways for us to connect personally with God. Those human-like descriptions help us relate to God in ways that we can understand.

More than 2,000 years ago, the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria taught that the expressions in the Torah were metaphorical. And the early sages of the Talmud repeated 19 times “*dibrah Torah ke-lashon b'nei adam*---the Torah speaks in human language.” That our ancestors would use common metaphors to convey their sense of awe, gratitude, reverence, frustration, longing, and love for God is hardly

surprising. It is only natural and logical that we should try to understand things by relating them to known entities.

Nevertheless, an objection to the overuse of those anthropomorphic images of God, especially in our prayers, was by raised by another thoughtful Jew named Moses. Like the Moses of the Torah, this 12th century Moses was a revolutionary theologian. I'm talking about Moses Maimonides, commonly known as Rambam. This Rabbi, scholar, physician, and philosopher was the towering intellect of his day and his teachings are still widely studied in both religious and secular settings. By his day, idolatry was no longer a force. People did not pray to statues. Still, Rambam realized that the way people thought about God was still quite primitive: they envisioned God as a wise and powerful old man, God as a celestial figure, God as a mother or father. They thought of God as a sort of genie who could mysteriously provide miracles of health, safety and prosperity. . . if only one belonged to the right faith.

In his theological masterpiece, *Moreh Nevukhim*, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides set about the task of trying to elevate our thoughts to do away with the anthropomorphic images, conceptions, and distortions of God. He wanted us to create a mature relationship with God. *The Guide* was originally written in Arabic and was purposefully difficult in order to

obscure some of his more radical ideas. He was right to be concerned because *The Guide* was banned in certain regions by fundamentalists. Despite the controversies and the twists and turns of the Rambam's treatise, *The Guide* has remained a popular favorite. Indeed, Professor Micah Goodman's recent book, Maimonides and the Book That Changed Judaism, was a best seller in Hebrew and now is available in English translation. He wrote the book in part to address the hunger for Jewish thought and culture by secular Israelis. These secular Jews weren't looking to become more traditionally observant. Rather, they were and are eager to stake their claim, their share in the wisdom, the spiritual depth and the culture of Judaism.

Rambam championed the "Doctrine of Negative Attributes" through which he taught that God cannot (or should not) be described. One cannot or should not say that God is "this or that" because God is beyond our human capacity to grasp, let alone describe. Rather, we are closer to the truth when we say what God is not. For example, God is not human. God is not a being. Nor is it ever made explicitly clear what Rambam believed. Is God the creator of the world who is beyond our conception? Or did he believe that God is the intellect that unites all the world and is thereby quite

near and potentially quite intimate with each of us? Rambam presents both theological perspectives without choosing one over the other.

Maimonides challenged his readers. He did not write a book to resolve the questions of faith. He did not seek to correct our perplexity. Rather, he wrote a Guide for the perplexed. Rambam embraced perplexity not as a weakness, but as an honest expression of our search for meaning: a search for our connection to God and the purpose of life.

The Torah begins with the words *Beresheet bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v'et ha-aretz*, which is most accurately translated as: “When God began to create the heaven and the earth.” The Torah’s story of creation is not a chronology of events that has a beginning and a conclusion. Rather, the creation story is presented as an ongoing process. Indeed, we are still in the process of creating life and seeking to understand the meaning and purpose of life.

Similarly, there are no “conclusions” when we think about God. Rather, we are in a process: a journey that strives for a better understanding of our personal and collective relationship with God. So, too, for Maimonides. The ultimate spiritual goal is not just original thoughts but also new feelings. Our highest religious experiences are marked by our deepest and noblest emotions: love and awe. Neither of those qualities,

love and reverence, can be spoken of with definitive or certain terms, other than the fact that they both exist. One can know that there is love without being able to define it. Those who have lost love or, sadly, who may never have felt love, do not necessarily conclude that love is a fiction. They may very well still long for love, write songs about love and imagine what love could be, as if it were in their possession.

Likewise, for those who have a close, personal or even an intellectual conception of God, God's reality, God's truth is quite evident even though it may very well be beyond our capacity to define or describe. And for those who have not or do not now feel a personal or intellectual connection to God, this too is not a defect. For they can still long for and speak about a relationship to God even in their perplexity. Rambam's genius was in teaching us that being perplexed is a thoughtful and honest state. One might even say that our ancestors' revolutionary theology, one that rejected practices of idolatry, was the first to embrace perplexity. It was better to pray to a God you could not see, hear, touch or make of statue of than to settle on that which was not true.

In every generation we have sought to better understand our world and the purpose of our existence. In Judaism, we continue to seek, and we continue to find sparks of the Divine in all life. We are wowed by their

magnificence and we are outraged when they are violated. Let us not see the injustices in this world as proof that there is no God. Rather, like Jews of every generation, let us confront the injustices and the unfairness with a vision of a world that reflects a higher and nobler purpose.

We reveal God's presence when we act in determined partnership with God. When we pray and ask for help, God's response is self-evident. Help has already been sent. We are God's help. We have been empowered to heal this world. Our faith is not a resigned acceptance of what is. Rather, our Jewish faith is an expression of longing for a world that can be; and our faith is a determination that we can help to bring that life to reality.

From the earliest days of our people, the faith of Judaism and our partnership, our covenant with God, expresses our restless dissatisfaction of the status quo. Our relentless search for the truth, for what is right and just and fair and good is what has kept our Jewish family and faith alive, vibrant, and relevant for well over 3,000 years.

In the New Year 5779, let us continue our search, our covenant and our journey together---together with God.

Ken yihi ratzon.