



My Problem with God

(Rosh Hashanah morning 5769)

Ever since I was a child, I've had a problem with God. My problem began in Lutheran Sunday school, each time I heard Bible stories that shocked me. One of them was the story we read earlier: the story of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

I had a problem with God in this story. What kind of God asks a father to kill his son? And why would God even need to "test" Abraham in this way? Isn't God supposed to know everything? If so, wouldn't He know whether or not Abraham would be willing to sacrifice his son? It didn't make sense to me. And it made me wary of God.

God's image wasn't enhanced by other Bible stories I read in Sunday school. Take the story of Noah. God gets mad and decides to send a flood to kill all living things on earth. That didn't seem very fair. Did everybody really deserve to drown? What about the babies? I also remember hearing the story about how God destroyed the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and then how God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt because she looked back as she fled those cities. Well, looking back didn't seem like such a big deal. Did God turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt just for that?

It wasn't just the Bible stories that made me have a problem with God. It was also what I was taught to believe about how God works in the world.

I was taught that God controls everything that happens in life. Now, even though I was raised as a Lutheran, the notion that God controls everything that happens in life is not restricted to Christianity. Think about one of the prayers we read earlier today: The *Unetaneh Tokef*. This prayer depicts God sitting on a Throne of Judgment and deciding what's going to happen to each of us in the coming year. God decides "*who shall live and who shall die...who shall see ripe old age and who shall not...who shall be poor and who shall be rich....*" This image of how God works in the world is essentially the same image that I was taught to believe.

But I had a problem believing in that kind of God. I couldn't believe that everything happens because God makes it so. How could God cause little kids to starve? How could God send floods to sweep some people away and create earthquakes to crush others?

As you can imagine, that view of God provided little comfort to me, a girl whose loving, devout mother suffered terribly and died of cancer. If that was part of God's plan, then I wanted nothing to do with that God. So when I became an adolescent, I stopped attending church. And unlike Lot's wife, I never looked back.

My specific religious upbringing may have been different from yours, but I suspect that my experience sounds familiar. Many of you grew up with these same stories. As a result, many of you might also have a problem with God. Maybe you are stuck with the image of God you learned about through Bible stories – the One who commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, the God who made everyone drown in a flood, and so forth. Or maybe you cannot get past the image of God depicted in the words of our prayer books: God as the “King of the World,” the one who controls everything, and is therefore responsible for making good human beings suffer.

Can this really be the God in whom we believe? No wonder many leave the synagogue – some for good, some just until their own children are old enough to enroll in school, learn these Bible stories, read these prayers....and the cycle begins again.

You might think that since I chose to become a rabbi I got over my problem with God. Well, I didn't. I still have a big problem.

My problem surfaces every time I hear someone say “I'm not coming to synagogue any more because I don't really believe in God.” That is a problem. But I understand that problem. After all, the worship service in the synagogue seems to be mostly about God. Between now and the time we hear the final *shofar* blast at the end of Yom Kippur, we'll be singing about God, praising God and pleading with God. So I understand why people who struggle with God would think that the synagogue isn't the place for them. It seems to be the place where we worship a God who needs to hear a lot of praise and a lot of pleas.

But then I wonder: is this really a problem with God, or is it a problem with how we talk about God? The words of our liturgy and the stories of our Torah are an inheritance from our ancestors. These words about God do not necessarily reflect the reality of God, whatever that might be.

The God of the prayer book and the God of the Torah reflect the way that our ancestors understood their world. And their first premise was: God controls everything. Our ancestors didn't understand that nature has its own laws. They wouldn't explain an earthquake by pointing to the tectonic plates on our planet. They would say: God made the earthquake happen. They wouldn't explain a plague by speaking of microscopic viruses or bacteria. They would say: God made the plague happen.

We understand the world differently than our ancestors did. And because we have a different understanding, the God of the prayer book and the God of the Torah does not have to be the God in whom we believe.

Over the centuries many Jews have articulated different ways to think about God. Baruch Spinoza believed that God is found in the world of nature. Martin Buber taught that we meet God through our relationships with other human beings. And the humanist Erich Fromm suggested that God is an idea, a symbol of the most desirable good. Throughout the generations, different Jews have articulated different ways of thinking about God – and all of these ways are authentically “Jewish.”

But many people don't know that Jewish ideas about God are so diverse. And that's a problem.

I cannot tell you how many conversations I've had that begin with “Rabbi, I'm not very religious...that's why you haven't seen me around Temple much.” When I ask them what they mean by “not very religious,” they often say they do not believe in God. Then I press them to explain to me what they don't believe. They usually describe an image of God that I don't believe in either. But this is the image they have...and it prevents them from fully participating in the life of the synagogue.

That's my basic problem with God. Too often, God gets in the way. Too often, our problem with God distracts us from our real purpose in the world.

The Torah begins with the Hebrew word *Beresheet*, often translated as “in the beginning.” The Hebrew word *Beresheet* begins with the letter *bet*. There is a *midrash* --- a rabbinic teaching – that notes that the Torah begins with the letter *bet* because the letter is closed on three sides and open in the front. From the shape of the *bet*, the *midrash* derives the lesson that human beings should not speculate on what is above, below, or behind. In other words, we shouldn't spend too much time trying to comprehend the mystery of God. Instead, we are to look forward, to the path that we must take to live a moral life -- A life of purpose.

One of the things that helps us find this purpose is the ritual of coming together in prayer on these High Holy Days. We may not agree with the words our ancestors used to speak about God, but we can appreciate their human struggle to understand the world and their place in it. When we gather together in prayer, we connect to our ancestors and to their struggle to understand life's purpose – because we, too, are engaged in that struggle.

And our ancestors gave us a great gift. Thousands of years ago they articulated a moral vision that remains clear and true today. They pointed to the path we are to take in order to live a life of purpose.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, we are to “*cease to do evil; learn to do good.*” We are to “*devote (ourselves) to justice; aid the wronged.*” We are to “*Uphold the rights of the orphan and plead the cause of the widow.*” The words of our ancestors remind us that we have fundamental responsibility to help the most vulnerable in our world.

We who worship here today must heed the words of the great Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn taught that “Judaism is a religion of deeds, not of creeds.” Let’s not worry too much about creeds – what we believe about God. Let’s focus on our deeds. We know that people are suffering. How can we ease their pain? We know that wars are raging. How can we bring peace to our world? We know that children are starving. How can we feed them? We know that others need health care. How can we heal them? These are the true solutions to our problem with God. Because each of us in our own fashion, somehow, someday, will encounter God in this sacred work.

Ken yehi ratzon – May it be so.

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