

My Kind of God  
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Rosh HaShanah, 5766

*Dedication:*

*Over the past several months I have been blessed to participate every Tuesday in a very sacred conversation with members of this community. These individuals, through their wisdom, their insights, their questions and challenges have been my teachers. I gratefully acknowledge and thank all my Tuesday morning teachers.*

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Do you remember the movie Michael that was released a few years ago? It is the story of three reporters working for a supermarket tabloid who are sent to investigate reports of an "angel" living at the Milk Bottle Hotel in a small town in the middle of Iowa. When they finally are face to face with this "angel" Michael he turns out to be a cigarette smoking, boxer wearing, sugar addicted, overweight, unshaven ... guy .... with wings.

Each reporter begins with questions based upon their pre-conception of what an angel should be. After trying to respond to many of the questions, Michael finally shrugs his shoulders shakes his head and responds, "I'm not that kind of angel."

No kidding ...

What we learn as the movie goes on however, is that Michael really is an angel, it's just that our perceptions are off.

Perceptions versus reality is a main theme of this movie. The adjustment of perceptions and reality, is also the theme of this little drama that we will enact over the next week and a half.

And just like those dubious reporters, who could not readily accept the image of the angel in front of them, so too, are many of us skeptical about the image of God presented in our prayerbooks, or that we have conceived in our own minds. Over the course of the movie, the reporters come to find that their preconceptions about angels are just too limited and incomplete.

So too regarding Michael's boss, the big guy, the head honcho, the *ribono shel olam*, ... Adonai, Elohim, Ruler of the Universe, *Avinu Malkeynu* Yahweh, Jehovah, Yud

Hey Vav Hey ... By any other name ... God.

So today as we confront once again a perplexing array of theological issues dressed up in an image of Judge, Ruler, Father, Inscraper in the book of Life, and so many more, allow me to take a few minutes to, perhaps, reshape that image just a bit.

“Rabbi, I have to make a confession.”

I can't tell you how often I hear these words:

To which I always want to respond, “I'm not that kind of clergy.”

Of course I don't. But what I often do ask is, “What god is it that you don't believe in?” You see, I have come to understand “not believing in God” as shorthand for something else. So, let me share with you a confession of my own. I don't believe in God either.

Really I don't ...

I don't believe in the God of my childhood. I don't believe in an old sage, sitting on a throne, stroking his white beard and looking down with wisdom and care upon His creation. I *used* to believe in that God ... but I don't anymore. That is not kind of God.

I don't believe in the God of my Bar Mitzvah, either. In the months leading up to my Bar Mitzvah, my grandfather, of blessed memory, had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. The prognosis was rather grim. He was given very little chance of survival. I used to pray regularly - and rather fervently for a thirteen year old, for God heal him. And He did. At least that's what I thought. My prayers, joined with my family's prayers worked! I used to believe in that kind of a God. But, thirty years later, at my grandfather's funeral ... It was not to this god that I prayed. That was no longer my kind of God.

Twenty five years ago I wrote a statement of my personal theology in which I spoke about God as an *elevating* force, lifting us up towards a messianic ideal, helping us to raise the actions of our everyday existence to a higher, more meaningful and sacred plane. Even this God, I would have to say, is not, today, my kind of God.

Oh, and I don't believe in “Him” either. I don't believe in “Our Father, Our King” I don't believe in “Our Lord or, for that matter in Her or Lady or Our Queen. I don't believe in a gendered god ... Who makes some of us much more godlike than others. I don't believe in a God with a watchful eye, a strong right hand or, for that matter in a god that is a

southpaw either ... Sandy Koufax may have been a god, but god is definitely NOT Sandy Koufax.

Recently I had a conversation with an old acquaintance, a devout, fundamentalist, Christian. "When I need to really know the truth," she told me I ask God a question and then open my Bible. God's answer is there." When she wanted to know about abortion she asked God, opened her Bible and God told her that all life is precious.

So I asked her, "What about the Quran? Is God's truth there?"

"It's wrong," was her very simple reply.

"Of course," she continued, God tells me to love my neighbor as myself; and so I do. But God had nothing to do with the Quran."

Go and tell that to your Muslim neighbors.

Of course, we have our own fundamentalists, who like every other fundamentalist, claim God's truth as their sole possession. Take, for instance, former Israeli chief rabbi Ovadia Yosef whose recently offered that the devastating effects of Hurricane Katrina were due to President Bush's support of the Israeli pullout from Gaza.

That's right, Rabbi Yosef and his followers are convinced that God's wrath was inflicted upon the poor and destitute of New Orleans as a punishment against George Bush.

I can't help but smile imagining the discussion of ownership of God's truth that might take place between the followers of Rabbi Yosef, and President Bush's own bible packing, fundamentalist supporters. Ah, to be a fly on the wall at that meeting!

I wish that this was the end of it, but Rabbi Yosef's profaning of God's name does not end there ... He has said further that God's punishment of New Orleans comes as punishment for the lack of Torah study among the *kushim*, that is the black people of New Orleans. I guess that Rabbi Yosef has forgotten the words of the prophet Amos who speaking to the Israelites asked, "Are you not as the children of the *kushim* to me, O Children of Israel?"

For anyone to feel that they are the sole possessor's of God's truth, to think that only they know God's true intentions, is at the very ancient core of the religious, racial and social intolerance that continues to plague us today. It tears at the very seams of civility and public

discourse that hold our society together. I have NEVER believed in that kind of God.

We probably feel ourselves comfortably distant from that kind of thinking, but, just how far are we really when we begin to ask, in times of personal angst and despair, “Why did God do this to me?” “Why is God punishing me?”

When we try to find some answer for God’s allowing for earthquakes, or shootings, or planes flying into buildings, we are regressing into a kind of fundamentalist thinking, that, in our more rational moments we would probably all agree is NOT our kind of God.

So, there is, *I must confess*, a heck of a lot not to believe in. And, if I began from the premise that *my* belief in God *had to* correspond with one of *these* beliefs in God ... That *my* God had to be what someone else told me was God, Well, I certainly would not be standing here. In fact, I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t even find me sitting among you. I’d be at the beach today ... and not to do *tashlich*.

And yet, I do believe. I am a true, firm, devout, flag waving believer in God’s presence in my life, indeed, in all of our lives. I feel God’s presence very strongly among us as we join together to hear the call of the Shofar welcome the new year, to call us to attend to what has been, and to consider the possibilities and promise of what might be.

But now I have a bit of a dilemma I’ve already told you my problem with believing in someone else’s conception of God ... and now I am going to share mine with you. So, let me make it clear, there is no obligation to have to walk out of here tonight in agreement with me. I am NOT that kind of Rabbi. BUT, I hope that you will continue the conversation with me, in person, by email, snail mail, carrier pigeon ... whatever works, but consider tonight just the beginning of a conversation. Together we can continue to think and discover and grow.

I begin with this ... Practically any sentence that begins with “God is ...” Is already wrong. To objectify God is to limit God. That is, of course, exactly what the 2<sup>nd</sup> commandment says: “You shall not make for you any engraved image, or any likeness ...” (Exodus 20.4) The minute we make God into a thing, we have frozen God in time and space.

A millenium ago the great rabbi Moses Maimonides taught that the most we can do is to talk about what God is *not*. God is *not* Him, Father, Redeemer, Shechinah, Helper,

Healer ... Because God *is* all of these things and infinitely more. God is not any one of them.

In fact, I would suggest that the only thing we can accurately say about God is: “God is ...”

Indeed, the Hebrew name for God, Yud Hey Vav Hey, suggests just this. The unpronounceable word we read as “Adonai” is a conflation into one symbol of the verbs was, is and will be. Something we express each time we sing Adon Olam: “hu hayah, hu hoveh, hu yiheeyeh ...” That is, “God was, God is, God always will be” If I must pick a component of grammar to identify with God, I would suggest that the Jewish conception of God is much more a verb than a noun.

Does this, somehow make God less real? If God is not a ‘thing’ then does God not exist? Is love real? Is courage real? Is compassion real? None of us would argue that these things exist. We can not see them, or touch them, but we can certainly feel them. For me, God, is the well spring from which these life enhancing and meaning producing blessings flow. These ‘things’ that give our lives ultimate purpose and meaning, that truly make us human *beings*, flow, I believe from the God-source that resides in each of us.

We are told in the story of creation that we are each created, *b’tzelem elohim*, “in God’s image.” I understand that to mean that each of us is the embodiment of Divine potential. God is ultimate potential and possibility brought to life in our world by the will of those who understand that they have been created *b’tzelem elohim*, in the Divine Image.

This is the cryptic message in the story of Moses and the burning bush. Having been asked by God to take on the mission of freeing the Israelites, Moses expresses his doubts of his own ability. “How will the Israelites know that I am not some lunatic?” to paraphrase Moses. “Who should I say has sent me on this task?” God replies, “Eheyeh asher Eheyeh”, I will be what I will be ... tell them “Eheyeh” has sent you.

Now, Moses never actually uses this name, “Eheyeh” with the Israelites, from which our sages understand that Moses is really asking for himself, not for the Israelites. He is inquiring for himself about the nature of God, and is told in return, “I will be what you need me to be, I will be a source of strength when you need, I will be a source of compassion when you need, I will be a source of leadership and wisdom, I will be the source from which

you can find the courage and strength to face Pharaoh, to face the sources of your enslavement and bring freedom to yourself and your people.

God is the source of the potential that resides in each of us, to free ourselves from the bonds that enslave us. Today, no less than Passover, our task is to examine the bonds that enslave, and to realize that the potential for release exists deep within us, exists in God's image and possibility in each of our souls.

As may be evident, my search for God takes me in a different direction. My kind of God demands a search that is not upward and beyond my life, but rather, inward and deep into the depths of my soul. For me, reaching for God is not elevating to new heights, but reaching to new depths, uncovering new layers, exposing a light that shines at the core of my soul, a light that is the source of love and strength, courage and blessing, conviction and sacredness.

I believe that this God lies at the depths of each human soul, awaiting to be discovered and revealed. Yes, in some horrible and tragic instances this Divine light remains forever hidden, the victim of unthinkable abuses or anger or hatred, or a multitude of humanly inflicted evils that subsume and perhaps even extinguish that light in a suffocating and impenetrable shell. But, I believe that there resides at the core of the vast majority of human souls a God that is a uniform and unifying source of morality, a source of healing and hope.

I agree with Rabbi Harold Kushner who once wrote: "... it may be hard to persuade someone philosophically that there is a God who sets moral standards for us. ... But we instinctively feel that there is something lacking in our philosophy when it can be reduced to: "Personally, I choose not to torture little children or persecute people because of their race or religion, but if it doesn't bother you to do it, go ahead."

All of this theology is bound up on this day in one tiny but most significant: *teshuvah*, repentance. Literally: return. Return to God, return to your godliness, return to the source of life and meaning, return as Reb Shlomo Carelbach would sing, "to the land of your soul."

To be created in the image of this kind of God, is to recognize the source of potential for good, for love and hope and healing at the root of your soul. For me, as I face these days of awe, it means I'm not done yet! For all that I have become, for all that I have

done, there is still more work to do, work that will never end, changing and evolving each day, as I move, hopefully, nearer and nearer to that Divine image. It is a growing that will only cease when my life upon this earth has ended.

Among his literary remains the author Nathaniel Hawthorne, left notebooks that contain random ideas he jotted down as they occurred to him. Among them was an idea for a short story that reads: "Suggestions for a story – story in which the principal character simply never appears."

Rabbi Sidney Greenberg commenting on this idea tells us that "Unhappily, this is the story of too many lives. The principal character simply never appears. The person we might grow into, the human being we might become, doesn't show up.

Our potential greatness lies unrealized, the splendor remains imprisoned, the promise unfulfilled. Our lives develop a static character."

These days are rightly called days of awe ... for each of us stands, as did Moses, before the burning bush, on holy ground. We stand face to face with God's image burning from deep within. And, as we gaze, we are confronted by the most difficult of questions: 'Will we choose life?' Will we choose to make ourselves in the image of the Divine planted deep within each of our souls? Do we have the strength and courage to enter the promised land? Or, will we remain -as we have been: static unmoving, unchanged, experiencing the death of the soul in the wilderness?

Our task today is to open our hearts, and there to find the place of Divine being and possibility, there to find the place of God's presence in our lives, that we might bring wholeness and the sweet promise of blessing to each life we touch.

Taking to heart that planted deep within is an image of the Divine, we can unfetter the chains that have limited the possibilities of our own lives, freeing ourselves to grow, to change and to evolve. We can realize our godlike greatness, liberate the Divine splendor and fulfill our God given promise. We can liberate the character waiting inside each of our souls. A character created in the image of a God of boundless potential and infinite possibility. This God, my God, is the source of my life and being. A force flowing from deep within with the promise of tomorrow. *This God is, most definitely, my kind of God.*

May this year be a sweet year of fulfilled promise, a year of realized potential, a year

filled with godliness a year, truly overflowing with life and with great blessing.  
I'Shanah Tovah Tikateyvu.