

Erev Yom Kippur / Kol Nidre 5768
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Al Tifrosh Min HaTzibor - Not turning our back on God

At what point in human history did we decide that murder was wrong? When did early man establish that stealing from your neighbor was unacceptable? Were actions committed with no sense of guilt and right or wrong until we found God? Did our laws and value system instantly appear at a mountain ablaze with thunder and lightening? Or did a code of ethics develop starting with early man and continue through the process of evolution?

This summer, one of the books on the New York Times Bestsellers list was by author Christopher Hitchens, god (lower case) Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. In his book, Hitchens challenges the existence of God. He suggests that our values and ethics come not from a religious faith or a belief that God commanded us to behave in a particular manner, but that we established our moral compasses through evolution. Hitchens uses Darwin's observation of animals, seen to behave ethically to one another through solidarity, clans and evidence of sympathy toward fellow creatures. Hitchens refutes the assumption that theft, murder and perjury were seen as acceptable until we received the Ten Commandments at Sinai. Instead, he asserts that these laws were inherent as we evolved and our societies developed. Ultimately, Hitchens suggests that religion can be more than just a waste of time, but can in fact be destructive because it leads to tribal warfare and hateful acts all in the name of God.

Rather than a belief in an incorporeal being, Hitchens suggests that the study of science, philosophy and literature should be enough to quench our thirst for explaining the unknown.

Christopher Hitchens and authors like him are discrediting religion and suggesting that how we live and our ethical compasses should not rely on our belief in God or religion. That this need for religious continuity and community should not be relied upon and human dependence on such is dangerous and prevents us from evolving since we have become religious communities satisfied with trusting in that which cannot be seen, heard, or touched.

On the surface, his arguments are compelling. Yes, as an advanced society who continues to develop greater understanding of the world and its early beginnings, it is rational to question the existence of a being greater than ourselves. At a time in which we are able to control elements of our environment in order to make the desert bloom or harvest the wind to produce energy for our cities, it is easy to say, 'we don't need the ancient prayers of our ancestors for abundant crops and prosperity -- these are all under our control.'

However, is controlling our environment enough basis to criticize or even deny the existence of God? I'm going to make an assumption here, and please forgive me if this assumption is incorrect, but I would suggest, that controlling our environment and a firm understanding of science is not enough for those of us sitting here tonight. Each of us, whether out of obligation, tradition or belief in a greater power, are seeking a deeper understanding and relationship with God. If there was not a small part of us that is even a bit curious about the role God plays in our lives, would we be here tonight? Would we feel that obligation to come into this place on what is

the holiest of nights of the year? If we did not have even the smallest twinge of curiosity, need or desire to build our relationship with God, then maybe Hitchens' hypothesis that belief is stupid and unfounded, is true. But your being here tonight speaks otherwise. Each of us has some level of belief in God, or at least in a power that is beyond our understanding. It is one of our great challenges to **not** turn our backs on God and hence on our religious self.

We Jews are not alone. In every generation, humans have developed philosophies and religions to seek out God. We have sought, over the centuries, for ways to build a relationship with the untouchable and unknowable. And for 4,000 years, Judaism has desired a pathway to God. We pour through our history and sacred texts, as we seek a clearer understanding of God's will and exemplify the manners in which we can exhibit this will. We desire to build and enhance our spiritual life, which can only be done through trial and experience. It is a process that seems never-ending, as each day we are faced with new spiritual challenges.

First, we yearn to understand who God is. When we look at God in the Torah and throughout the Bible, we are confronted with a wrathful God. In the very beginning we are presented with the story of creation including Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve are given very clear instructions about how they can eat of any fruit in the garden, however, they are told **NEVER** to eat from the tree of knowledge. After they have disobeyed this order, God expels Adam and Eve from the Garden and commands them never to return. Then, as if we still don't get the point, it is not even a couple of chapters later that we are confronted with the story of Noah and God's destroying of the world and all its inhabitants in order to wash away evil and start again. There are many commandments which teach to love God, do justly and walk in God's path in order that we may be blessed. Yet, if we choose to do evil, then God's wrath will pour forth through destruction and curses. This view of God can be very disconcerting and we may wonder why should we have faith in a wrathful God.

Rabbi Harold Kushner was once asked if he was bothered by a wrathful God that is found in the Bible. He said no, he prefers this to "the God of the philosophers, a God incapable of emotion because emotion implies change and passivity."[\[1\]](#) Rabbi Kushner suggests that he would rather experience a God who feels joy in human accomplishments and sadness at our misgivings. Without any evidence of emotion from God, we might wonder if God was at all concerned about our actions or our experiences in the world.

Abraham Heschel taught, "the God of Aristotle was the Unmoved Mover, but the God of Israel was the most-moved Mover, a God moved by strong emotions, a God who loved, who cared about us, who grew angry at wickedness, who was offended by disloyalty."[\[2\]](#)

Emotions are integral to our relationship with God. It is how we express our thanks, seek understanding of pain in regards to life's challenges, and create a place in which we expound our hopes and dreams. It is difficult to separate the logical from the emotional in our exploration of God. And in this way, it means that we are challenged to even express **why** we believe in God and who God is. Think about the time someone asked you about your belief in God. Where did the answer come from? Where did your opinion originate? When asked, "do you believe in God and how do you know God exists", how did you answer?

Logically, if there can be a logical defense of religion, we might answer by saying, “there are some things in life we cannot explain, but it is in these moments that we find God”. The birth of a child, a random streak of good fortune, even the storm that destroys a village or city. Each of these is an event that is beyond our control and the end is in God’s hands. Yes, we have the power to influence the outcome in cases of birth and even in death, but ultimately, we must step back and realize that it is beyond our control, and there is no logical explanation except, to quote our Patriarch, Jacob, “God is in this place, and I, I did not know.”

In our search for God we acknowledge that we are in search of absolutes. As we explore, we also have to dive inward for we are taught that we are created in the image of God and from within ourselves do we find God. But each individual is unique. The midrash teaches that God is not like the coin maker who creates a mold and then stamps out identical coins with the image of the king. Rather, the rabbis teach, God cast each of us using inspiration from the Divine Image, but no two of us are identical. The mystics continued with this idea and maintain that the ideal attributes of God are written in the human form which they call “Adam Kadmon – the archetypal human.” Not only is our physical shape in that form of the Divine, but also our numberless talents and ideals reflect God’s image.

Ultimately, there is a level of abstraction in our lives that each of us go through in evaluating our emotions and experiences and hence our connection to God. How do we know God exists? It is an imprecise question that we cannot fully answer, just as you could ask a mother, “how do you know you love your child?” A parent does not have to fully put into words the love they feel, they just know they love their child.^[3] And so it is with God – How do we know that God is compassionate and full of emotion? Because we experience that compassion and emotion throughout our lives.

There are some who believe that God is incapable of emotion, which implies that God cannot change or is not actively participating in our world. On the opposite side, we can argue that God is full of emotion, through us and this moment of introspection, as we seek acceptance and approval from God.

Earlier, we examined the idea that God might seem wrathful and seeks only perfection. But we can take exception to this from the moment of the first rainbow, after the flood. This was to be the ‘proof’ of a promise God made to Noah and the world that never again would God destroy the world. It was at that moment that God specifies that it was never about perfection, rather, God seeks improvement.

Rabbi Harold Kushner suggests that,

“On Yom Kippur, God is pictured as saying, ‘That’s alright. I don’t expect you to be perfect. You know the Hassidic saying ‘Better a sinner who knows that he’s a sinner than a saint who knows that he’s a saint,’ God says, ‘I want you to know that there is forgiveness in the world. I’ve given up looking for perfection. I’ll settle for improvement. I want you to bring Me your whole self. Don’t deny parts of yourself because you’re ashamed of them, because you think they are less admirable than the rest of you. Don’t try to hide parts of yourself from Me because

you're afraid I won't like you if I saw the whole you. Bring Me your entire self, flaws and all, and let Me give you the sustaining message that your whole self is acceptable in My sight.”[\[4\]](#)

Our relationship with God is not about how we can hide our flaws or mask our imperfections. Our relationship with God is developed through a personal connection and conversation with God who becomes a partner and friend in our lives. And this relationship is just as unique as each of you sitting in this sanctuary. Throughout the Bible, God is defined by the names our ancestors gave God. Abraham called God, El Shaddai – God Almighty, Jacob knew God as one who sent an angel to wrestle and test him. Moses saw God as *Ehyeh*, I am, and Elijah heard God in a small voice. Later in the Talmud, God is referred to as *HaMakom*, Everywhere and *HaKadosh Barechu*, The Holy One of Blessing. There are over 70 names of God expressing every possible emotion and idea of who God is and where God is found.

I can't agree with Christopher Hitchens who seems to seek to destroy all hope that there is a God or being that is greater than ourselves. I cannot accept that we are alone in this world, left to our own devices to do with this planet whatever we choose? I cannot accept that there is no power greater than anything we can ever explain.

Ultimately, as I try to navigate through life and all of the challenges and blessings that are before us, I have to believe that God exists and that I cannot turn my back on God nor will God turn His back on us. Even in those moments that seem so dark, times when we can only ask 'why?' I must believe.

Tonight, we are challenged to explain that which we cannot explain. Challenged to name the emotions we feel when we stand in God's presence. Challenged to define that which has no definition. However, with a little practice, with a lot of emotion, and with an open heart and soul, we might be able to open ourselves to the joy, love and hope we find in God. And maybe with a little faith, we can remember that we are not perfect and nor do we have to be perfect. That we will make mistakes and still, God will love us and so will our family and friends.

[\[1\]](#) Rabbi Harold Kushner, *The American Rabbi*, summer 1998, page 41.

[\[2\]](#) Ibid.

[\[3\]](#) Rabbi Raymond Zwerin, *The American Rabbi*, summer 1998, pgs 54-63.

[\[4\]](#) Harold Kushner, *The American Rabbi*, summer 1998 page 44-45