

“Trying to Understand G-d”
*Rosh Hashanah 5771 * Sermon I of II*
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It was a question that I am not sure I would have been able to answer had I been there. Jonah – now five – was with his grammy and papa having the regular kind of conversation many grandchildren have with their grandparents, when he turned to Emily’s mom and asked: “Grammy, where was I before I was born?” I am fairly certain that if Jonah had asked me, my mind would have started racing trying to figure out some kind of age appropriate answers about babies and where they come from. Grammy, though – the seasoned and wise soul that she is – calmly replied to her grandson: “Well, Jonah, where do YOU think you were before you were born?” ---- Without a moment’s hesitation – and clearly having had the answer in his mind all along – Jonah replied simply: “I was with G-d.”

When I heard the story after the fact, I couldn’t help but smile at how easily such a thought had come to him.....how comfortable he felt with the idea of G-d that he could imagine being together with the Holy One before making his grand entrance into the world and becoming part of our family. And once again I was reminded that the beginnings of some of the best theology come from the mouths of our children.

Nobel Prize winning author, Isaac Bashevis Singer once recalled: “It may sound strange, but I began to ponder creation when I was still a little boy....What is time? What is space? What is eternity? Infinity? How can something be created from nothing? G-d created the world, but who created G-d?”

As we mature, however, the subject of G-d becomes complicated.

Throughout all of last year, as you know, our congregation engaged in a wonderful process of formulating a new Temple Beth Shalom vision statement. Many members of our community set about the important task of reflection, consideration, and crafting a statement that accurately articulated who we are as a congregation and what we strive to make real. The document as it developed – along with the also evolving mission statement – spoke of learning, prayer, sacred community, and *tikkun olam* – healing our broken world. In the spring, a draft of the proposed vision statement was introduced to our Board of temple leadership for feedback and comments. Both in substance and poetry, the leaders gathered that night affirmed the hard work that had already been done. And then, part way through the meeting, someone raised a hand and asked the question: “Where is the word “G-d” in all of this?” Immediately people started scanning the statement. The questioner was correct. Indeed while the text for the proposed vision had used such words as “holy,” “sacred,” and “covenant,” the word “G-d” was nowhere to be seen.

For some, this was not problematic at all. Those other words alluded to G-d, even if the statement did not mention G-d specifically. And this, they felt was enough. Furthermore, some commented there are many people in our community who do not believe in G-d and that using such specific language might distance them from what the vision was trying to express. Others, however, respectfully disagreed - commenting that, as a temple – a House of G-d – we should not be apologetic and speak around the word G-d, but include it.

Sitting next to Beth, our Temple president, I recall thinking that this was one of the best Board meetings in which I had ever participated. The 'G-d talk' was thoughtful, impassioned, personal, and respectful.and, all the while, I couldn't help but wonder at how it was that G-d had somehow become a kind of 'third rail' topic – one that needed to be avoided - at temple.

This morning, I would like for us to begin a conversation about G-d. I would like for us to thoughtfully consider what we believe – what we don't believe – why – and, perhaps most importantly, what difference it makes. As the High Holy Days are framed at the beginning and the end by Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – so too will this sermon come in two parts. This morning I will try to help us approach the very question and challenge of G-d. And on Yom Kippur morning, I will speak about the possibility of having a relationship with G-d. **The goal, of course, is not to force faith** – for as we know, to be Jewish, one need not specifically believe in G-d – but rather to grow through our engaging our tradition and one another. For those who wish to explore this further, I am pleased to be offering a four part interactive adult learning series following the Holy Days.

In our community, we are blessed to have a rabbi who is often referred to as “the Rabbi who wrote the book on G-d.” To which, I happily reply...Actually, he wrote two. Rabbi Sonsino, I know will be – as he has always been – a wonderful source of insight to us as we embark on this journey.

G-d is certainly not a stranger in this country. The latest Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey, taken in June 2008 revealed that 88% of Americans believe in G-d. And these numbers have been consistent for a number of years. Interestingly, in the Jewish community specifically, the numbers decrease, with only 72% stating that they are either 'Absolutely' or 'Fairly Certain' that G-d exists. And when the Reform movement is surveyed on its own, this number goes down to 66%.

I believe that the likely reasons for this sacred skepticism are numerous and understandable. Many of us, for example, find it difficult to see ourselves in those who seem to be speaking most often and most loudly when it comes to G-d. A number of those who speak of faith do so from a more fundamentalist perspective – using language about G-d that describes miraculous interventions and sacred encounters. At the same time, there are those believers who readily reject discoveries of science – in particular, teachings about evolution - in favor of, what they consider to be, Biblical belief. I was surprised, by the way, to learn that according to a 2005 NBC News survey, approximately 44% of the American public believes that the Biblical story of the creation of the world in six days is true.

For many, another barrier to belief is the extraordinary advances that have been made in science. Such advancement, they say make belief in G-d, if not impossible – then at least, unnecessary. Mitch Albom, in his most recent book, “Have a Little Faith” recalls a conversation that he had with his rabbi. During that talk, Albom said: “We live in a world where your genes can be mapped, where your cells can be copied.....We have science to tell us of the earth's creation; rocket probes explore the universe. The sun is no longer a mystery. And the moon – which people used to worship? – we brought some of it home in a pouch. Why in such a place, where the once-great mysteries have been solved does anyone still believe in G-d?” Douglas Adams, the 20th century British

author, put it less sensitively when he asked: "Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?"

Even our most oft-read texts – our Torah, our prayer books, even the literature of the rabbis – the pages on which G-d appears most frequently – challenge the ability of many to believe. Here we find stories of G-d that portray events and encounters that, in some way, are supposed to shape our understanding of G-d....and even frame our conversation with G-d. Yet often, the G-d that is described in these texts seems far from any intellectually and spiritually honest idea of G-d that we might have.

And finally, for others the chaos that exists in our world is simply inconsistent with the belief in a G-d that is supposed to be caring, omniscient and omnipotent.

Yet, despite the strong feelings on either side, the societal discussion continues. Last spring, Boston's New Center for Arts and Culture sponsored a program entitled "The Great G-d Debate." The event featured two outstanding speakers: Christopher Hitchens – author of the best seller "G-d is Not Great" - and Rabbi David Wolpe, author of, among other books, "Why Faith Matters" and spiritual leader of Temple Sinai in Los Angeles. The event generated so much interest that it had to be moved from its original venue at Temple Israel to the much larger John Hancock Hall at the Back Bay Events Center. That night, over 1,000 were in attendance.

As we know, debate about G-d and difficulties related to faith are as old as the idea of G-d itself. And truth be told, from a Jewish perspective, these have never been problematic. In Judaism, what one believes has always been far less important than the way that one lives.

Yet what IS important in Judaism, is that we continually engage in an process of trying to understand what we mean by G-d. Even Moses – though he was said to have had the most intimate relationship with G-d – still had his questions. According to Torah, Moses asks the Holy One: "May I see Your face." To which G-d replies, "No one may see My face and live." The patriarch Jacob, after famously wrestling with an angel in the Book of Genesis, has his name changed to *Yisrael* – Israel – a word that literally means: "One who struggles with G-d." And so began a legacy of Jewish G-d-wrestling that continues to this day. As scholar and survivor Elie Wiesel has written: "A Jew can love G-d. Or a Jew can hate G-d. But a Jew cannot ignore G-d."

Peter Steinfelds is the longtime writer of the outstanding "Beliefs" column that appears regularly in the "New York Times." Not long ago, Steinfelds celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the publication of his column. And, in doing so, he wrote a piece reflecting upon the depth and breadth of the close to three hundred essays that had been presented over the years. He noted that among all of these, there had been a few unifying threads – underlying convictions – that were a mainstay of his writing. Among them, he wrote: "Intelligence and critical reasoning are essential to adult approaches to faith." He then followed with the observation: "It (remains) curious (to me) that so many otherwise thoughtful people imagine that what they learned about religion by age 13, or perhaps 18, will suffice for the rest of their lives. They would never make the same assumption about science, economics, art,...or love."

Without question, our conversations must be thoughtful. And, at the very same time it is important to acknowledge that exploring G-d is not easy. Scholar, historian and writer of

a number of books about G-d - Karen Armstrong - makes the observation that in her experience much of what is said about G-d these days is overly simplistic – reflective of an attitude that many people seem to believe that the concept of G-d is supposed to be easy. In the introduction to her latest work, *The Case for G-d*, Armstrong tells of how often people approach her following the publication of a book and tell her almost reproachfully: “That book was really hard.” “(Every time) I hear (this) – Armstrong says – “I want to reply: “Of course it was. It was about G-d.”

The challenges to approaching the subject of G-d are many. Perhaps first and foremost, what is essential to recognize is that, when it comes to G-d, the truth of the matter is, it is impossible to know what we are really talking about. Rabbinic scholars – as well as teachers and sages from most of the great religions throughout history – all agree: the G-d of which they conceive is so great, so beyond limitation, so holy that even the commonly used words “great,” “good,” “powerful,” and “holy” cannot accurately be used to describe G-d. Even the sentence: “G-d exists,” is said to be highly problematic because it implies the existence of a “something.” These teachers are quick to remind us that G-d is, perhaps, better described as, “No – thing” or “nothing” – beyond all. The Jewish mystical tradition even goes so far as to refer to G-d by a special name: *Ein Sof* – literally: “Without end” or “Infinite.”

One poet expresses it beautifully, saying: “Were the skies all made of parchment, all the reeds quills, and all the seas and waters made of ink – and all the inhabitants of earth a scribe, we could not begin to describe You.” And, offering a more contemporary analogy, Rabbi David Wolpe reminds us that we can no more grasp G-d than a newborn can grasp physics.

And yet, despite this understanding of the complete and utter intellectual inapproachability of G-d – beginning thousands of years ago peoples intuited the presence of some Unifying Reality in the universe – some inexplicable source of order and meaning. And though they couldn’t describe it, they sought to somehow align their lives with it. In ancient times, different peoples chose to use language – understanding its limitations – to give a name that would enable them to relate to this Transcendent Reality. One people called it “Brahman” – “the ALL of the cosmos” – Another, referred to it as Dao – the “WAY” of the universe – others, “Nirvana” --- while amongst the Hebrews – it was called by the Hebrew letters Yud, Hey, Vav, Hey – root letters for the word “BEING” or essence.

Historians tell us that ancient peoples used two separate but equally important frames to understand the world in which they lived. The first frame was called “logos” or “reason.” The way of “logos” helped humanity to help master the world and to live safely and productively in it. It was through the means of Logos that people were able to build cities – to establish a livelihood – and to explore the physical world.

Interestingly, it was the peoples of ancient Mesopotamia who were among the first to observe seven celestial bodies moving in a circular path. These bodies would later be known as the Sun, the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. More noteworthy still is the fact that the cosmologies of these people – their most essential stories of creation – did not include them. It wasn’t because they didn’t think to do so. Rather it was because they realized that while logos would enable them to explore the outer world, these stories were about something different: the more personal, inner world. And for this, people turned to a second “frame” – “mythos.”

The way of “mythos” enabled people to confront and to live with those aspects of life which logos could not – those aspects of life which were beyond their control. Through mythos people sought comfort and understanding in a world that was often chaotic and unpredictable. Mythos helped people who confronted illness and their own mortality. It offered insight and understanding of life’s meaning.

In many respects, the relationship between “logos” and “mythos” is the same as that between science and religion. For while science explores nature by testing, gathering data and enabling us to understand and master the world in which we live - religion’s primary task is to help us navigate a lifetime that is oftentimes unpredictable and chaotic. Religion’s main task is NOT to discern where we came from, but rather to help us understand WHY we are here. As Armstrong reminds us: ‘Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – the founders of Western Rationalism – (all) realized that there was no opposition between reason and transcendence.’ And in the words of Galileo – using language comfortable for him in his time: “Science teaches us how heaven goes, while Scripture teaches us how we go to heaven.”

It is, I believe, worthy of note that many in today’s scientific community do not see any contradiction between the role of science and that of faith. Consistently polls taken from amongst the American Academy of Sciences reveal that over 50% state a belief in G-d.

By the conclusion of the Beth Shalom Board meeting during which the ‘Great TBS G-d Debate’ took place – it was decided that our congregation’s new Vision Statement should, in fact, specifically include G-d...and should do so in such a way that both honors the members of our community – and, at the same time, states that an important part of who we are is that we take our evolving understanding of G-d seriously.

The specific G-d statement in our vision reads as follows:

We seek a relationship with G-d that is personal. Living in the tradition of being Yisrael – one who wrestles with G-d – we cherish our diversity of belief and Jewish expression. Each of us thoughtfully searches for understanding, guidance, and inspiration from the teachings and many voices of our tradition.

This notion of a “relationship” with G-d, is perhaps one of the greatest challenges in the framing of contemporary faith. How, after all, is it possible to relate in any personal way to that which we acknowledge to be infinite...ineffable....and intellectually unapproachable? It is a question that many continue to ask.

And on Yom Kippur morning.....we will explore it....together.....

Good Yontif.....