

Integrated Theology: A New Way to Wrestle with God
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Try God

Have you seen the enormous sign on the inbound side of the Mass Pike?

Simple and to the point: *Try God*

The sign makes God seem so accessible.

When I was growing up, we would often travel to the city of Pittsburgh and back. On the way home to our suburban enclave of Monroeville, we would encounter huge capital letters towering over the highway, providing a tremendously high and wide announcement to every passerby: Jesus is coming soon! It was just part of the landscape of our hometown.

A couple of years ago, following a Qabbalat Shabbat Service in our sanctuary, a lovely young man approached Rabbi Friedman and me. He told us he had been sent to give us the gift of God. I was incredulous. Memories of that sign on the highway and lots of experiences like it flooded my mind. I was about to respond but Rabbi Friedman, with his inimitable style and smile, offered the best reply, “No thanks,” he said. “We are all set.” And so we are.

So what do you think I am going to do on this day standing before you? I have no sign hidden under my tallit. But I want to make a declaration with a question. It turns out there is a grammatical structure to assist me called an interrobang. It is a question mark and an exclamation point together. It is a beautiful summation of the way Jews think as one rabbi noted back in 1962 when it was first introduced.¹ We affirm and doubt in the same breath. We know and don't know. Simultaneously.

There is a God but there is not a God. So, where and what is God? You can see why Jews don't put up signs on the highway. There would be crashing cars everywhere. There is a God but there is not a God. How could that be?

We are a monotheistic religion founded on the principle that all the disparate gods are really one God. There is no god of the Seas, or the Sky, or even the underworld. Our ancestors Abraham and Sarah found one God uniting the universe and united by the universe. Our tradition teaches us that their tent opened from all four sides in order to receive all wayfarers from any direction. I think the image of the tent had another purpose as well. The path to this One God has many sides. There is a God but there is not a God means within our own tradition, we may discover there are indeed many passageways leading us to the Divine.

Whether you are an atheist, an agnostic, a theist, or even a nihilist, I want to speak with you.

There is a new and old approach to seek and to understand the potential for connecting with this concept we call God. It has come out of my experience and honor of working on the committees responsible for the Reform Movement's prayerbook, *Mishkan T'filah*, and now a new Machzor, *Mishkan Hanefesh* which we piloted here last night.

If there is a God, where is God? The Hasidic master was asked by his students: Where does God dwell? The teacher responded: Wherever we let God in? This rabbi adds: if only it were that easy.

Out of the depths I call to You, the 130th Psalm reveals. I had always thought it is we, humans, who exist in those depths. Abraham Joshua Heschel presented a different interpretation. The Hebrew remains the same - ממעמקים קראתיך יהוה - but

switches the English translation around: "I call You out from the depths." Instead of us in the depths, it is God who is there. Hidden, mysterious, mystical, and formed with our words and our experience.

But, what words do we use? Even, the word, God, is just a placeholder for an idea, the ineffable, the never ending extension of our breath. No one knows how to pronounce God's name let alone to offer the exact description. We say "Adonai" but that is not how God's name is written with the four Hebrew letters *yud, hey, vav, hey* - יהוה. These letters can all be vowels which makes the word too difficult to pronounce or to invoke in prayer. They sound like the way we breathe so we say God or Adonai instead.

This makes for quite a conundrum. How might it be possible to search and struggle to find God when it is impossible even to say God's actual name?

In the Torah, Moses, encountering a theophany-a manifestation of the Divine in the form of the burning bush wants to have a name for this sacred encounter. We know this story. Here he was: reinventing himself after a life in Pharaoh's palace, setting up a new home in Midian, marrying and developing his resume as a shepherd, he comes upon a shrub burning but not burning up. A divine voice calls out to him with a new mission to free the Israelites. When Moses asks for a reference, God invokes this unpronounceable name in the form of *Ahiyeh asher ahियeh* - אהיה אשר אהיה - *I will be what I will be*. What kind of name is that? All of these are Hebrew letters which can also be vowels. The medium is the message. God is fluid, in a dynamic state. Becoming known. Becoming understood and explored. It is a wonderful component of our tradition that the consonant based language of Hebrew has God's name all in vowels. Somehow I think there was some kind of cosmic intention to allow for the open sound of possibility of the Divine.

But I know there are some who don't feel any need for naming, praying to, or discussing this idea of God. It would be unfair to try to convince from here any more than a sign on the highway could. I am aware of the admonition from the Midrash² "If you estrange those who are distant you will ultimately estrange those who are near." But you are here, maybe out of obligation, but you are here. Maybe you are like the guy in the story who is asked why he attends synagogue if he doesn't believe in God and he responds. "Goldschmidt goes to shul to talk to God. I go to shul to talk to Goldschmidt." Whatever draws us is important. I will say this; however, if there is any inkling, any space in your conception of the universe that the world, the existence of life, of humans, of all matter exists as part of something larger than the individual part, then I hope I can speak with you, too. We sit in this vast space as individuals and yet comprise something larger than ourselves.

Just so you know, rabbis and cantors struggle with the idea of God, too. No one must sign an affirmation of belief to be granted entrance to rabbinic school. Being willing to engage in the struggle is what is important. After all, we are known as *Yisrael*, which means *those who wrestle with God*. This summer there was an interesting conversation on the Reform rabbis listserv about belief in God and how many and whether our congregants actually still do believe in God. But, we must ask: what God? Is it the Biblical omnipotent God? The God portrayed as majestic, regal, royal? The Divine eminence of Mysticism? The Thou emerging in and through relationship? Awe? Mystery? Permeating every aspect of the universe? Is it the God who created the world or the One who disappeared while the world burned? This is what I know about our tradition. There is a God, but there is not A God. At least there is not just ONE way to describe God. Our tradition says there are seventy names of God reflecting the many dimensions and concepts of the Divine. Metaphors really, which

help us articulate that which we cannot pronounce. God is like a Shepherd, a Still Small Voice, a Parent, and even like a King. We are a people who juggle many ideas of God all at the same time. A paradoxical dialectic synergy.

The foundation of our tradition calls upon us to consider many ideas. If you open a page of the Talmud, you will find a vast array of opinions, ideas, and discussion all in disagreement and concert at the same time. In a similar vein, there is a concept in Judaism called *Elu v'elu*: divergent ideas which can contradict and complement at the exact same time receive equal importance and sometimes helps us reach an even better understanding. There is an argument in the Talmud³, a frequent event for sure. Hillel and Shammai are disagreeing. A heavenly voice is heard, which is also a frequent occurrence, who says *elu v'elu divrei elohim chayim* - אלו ואלו דברי אלוהים חיים: *These and also those are the words of the living God*. No single answer works all the time. It is a way to include more than one idea at the same time without excluding either one. It is a parent's dream when dealing with siblings. It is also, arguably, one of the most distinguishing and powerful aspects of Jewish tradition and education. In the Bible, in Rabbinic literature like the Talmud and Midrash and onward, our tradition is one of pluralism with multiple perspectives and diversity.⁴ It is a lesson for us about sitting at the same table with those who hold varied and different opinions from ours. I am not saying every opinion belongs but sometimes we get caught up in our own orthodoxies (small o) and narrow our path.

What happens when we turn to our prayer book?

For those who used the *Union Prayer Book* growing up, the *UPB* elicits great longing, fond memories, and the bonus was you didn't need to lift weights to hold it. With its clear instructions for the reader and the congregation, the rabbis knew where we stood and certainly, you knew where you sat. God was expressed in an

elegant, aural bouquet of Thee, Thou, and Thy, ever approaching Him as Father and Master of the Universe. We asked the Lord our God to be with us as we cherished a good conscience and testified to our faith. Those were the good old days when one service would suffice. And it did from 1895 to 1979, 84 years.

Then came *Gates of Prayer* in the age of choice. The ditto machine made us realize we could create multiple services (with or without the smell of fresh ink!) As a prayer book, *Gates of Prayer* presented ten different services to choose from on Shabbat eve. Here's a fun fact of prayer book history: the many service choices actually resolved a dispute. The members of the committee compiling *Gates Of Prayer* couldn't agree on one understanding of God. Therefore, they compromised. Each service represented a different theological understanding about God in the English.⁵ Each separate service alone combined with the others to create a diverse, unconnected whole.

When it was time for our movement to develop a new prayer book at the beginning of this century, a new thinking emerged. How do we bring disparate concepts of the divine mixed with a sense of human inadequacy and struggle together? How do we create a prayer book which fully embodies "*Yisrael-wrestling with God?*" Having two pages facing one another helped to resolve this dilemma. The layout allowed for more than one interpretational voice on the page. This solution, however, spurred another problem. Is it fair to someone using the prayer book not to find a consistency in the way God is presented? Our tradition responds: *v'elu divrei elohim chayim* - ואלו דברי אלוהים חיים: *These and also those are the words of the living God.* The structure of the two pages facing each other in our prayer book allows for the theological tent to be open from all sides within the structure of our tradition. Who decides what belongs and doesn't? The generations of editors and editorial committees from Rav Amram who wrote down the first prayerbook to the editors of *Mishkan*

Hanefesh, the name of our new machzor, play a key role in bridging the historical with the innovative.

The description and understanding of God is not handed down from on high, from Sinai, as it were. We, human beings interacting with life, must find that sacred way. The prayer book is a place where heaven and earth meet; where the eternal and the present kiss. Each of us enters the sanctuary with a different need, as the prayer goes. Some of us are lonely, or in celebration, in search, in a struggle or a combination of all of these emotions and desires. Where we come from is what we will look for within the pages of our prayer book, multiple diverse expressions of the divine all in one spiritual home. Henry Slonimsky, a beloved teacher of rabbis from many years ago, called the siddur, the prayer book, “The place where the soul is mirrored...or rather embodied...the individual’s soul in his or her private sorrows, and the people’s soul in its historic burdens, its heroic passion and suffering, its unfaltering faith, through the ages.”⁶ Liturgy is poetry, and poetry evokes. It reflects like a mirror of our inner life. What we find in its words is revelation both of ourselves and of the possibility of what God might be for us, even if some images of God may not speak to us.

How do we describe, then, all of these pathways, cover to cover and often on the same two pages?

I have a name for it: Integrated Theology. Integrated Theology juxtaposes and places different theological ideas in close proximity. Each can stand alone but together, though different, they can combine for a stronger and more complex understanding of God.⁷ Integrated Theology is like a musical piece with multiple notes interplaying one on top of the other separate and together. Dissonant notes and harmonious ones work together to make the whole piece.

Why call it Integrated though? I came upon this idea because of my husband. His work in bridging, contrasting and learning from different medical modalities from chemotherapy to acupuncture, from surgery to mindfulness meditation gave me an understanding of how bringing together disparate treatments and world views can potentially work toward an enhanced and more person centric, comprehensive care.

Fourteen years ago, I joined the awful club of having cancer. In diagnostic purgatory, that time period between diagnosis and discovery of its extent of damage, I referred often to the words in *Adon Olam, B'yado afkeed ruchi* - בידו אפקיד רוחי, *in God's hand I place my soul*. I found comfort in the idea of resting some control not just in my own hands. And now as a member of the cancer survivor club, I pray for the strength of each person who battles disease and illness regardless of its origins. You can be sure kayaking on the Charles, I find divinity surrounding me! Our lives take many turns down a circuitous route. We are multi faceted and if we are made in God's image, then God must be diverse and multi-faceted, too. The created is only a reflection of the Creator and we, humans to the core, are filled with contradictions and longings which evolve over a lifetime.

We want to believe, to have faith, to acknowledge from the depth of our souls there is more in this universe than an individual making his or her way through life. Many have confessed to me on more than one occasion how they don't believe in God. My job description has never involved confession; however some of those confessions hint at a longing to be part of something greater than oneself. I respond back, *Which God don't you believe in? There is a God but there is not A God*. The image of the hierarchical, omnipresent, omnipotent God is but one way to reach and to consider the divine. Through this concept of Integrated Theology offered by our new prayer books and our tradition as a whole, we can find alternate paths. Individual paths. Isn't it possible that we

seek a sense of closeness to something greater than we are? Don't we want to transcend the limits of our humanity to find meaning in the sacred task of living? Integrated Theology recognizes how finding God comes from the individual's ability to respond to the language and ideas presented by our sacred text. Like itunes, iphones, imessages, i(ntegrated Theology) we live in a world where each person holds the resource to make choices, decisions, and actions for him or herself. We no longer live in a time when the doctor dictates the entirety of treatment. Patient or better yet person centered care is the guiding principle. So, too, the individual holds possible access points to the Divine in his or her hand in the form of the prayer book as a personal search and struggle within the context of the entire community.

The prayer right in the middle of the service is called Avot. We praise the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of Sarah, the God of Rebecca, the God of Rachel and the God of Leah. The Midrash asks why the prayer doesn't say God of all of the ancestors together? Why this structure? Our tradition teaches through these forebears, each one of them, individually, had to find his or her own relationship and connection with God while being part of the line of collective tradition. And the text is clear: This challenge is dynamic and ongoing and often a struggle. We are the next generation who inherits that struggle. Don't just try God. Wrestle.

There is a God, but there is not a God. May each of us find blessing in our path toward the Divine and may that path take us through and with our community to places of wholeness, understanding and peace.

Footnotes

¹Block, Rabbi Bruce, RavKav Listserv, 8/4/13 (recounting Rabbi Murray Saltzman drash).

²Numbers Rabbah 8:4

³Erusin 13b

⁴Brettler, Marc, "Elu ve-Elu Divrei Elohim Hayyim: A Biblical View," *Sh'ma*, March 2006.

⁵Hoffman, Rabbi Lawrence A., *Gates of Understanding I, Shaarei Binah*, CCAR Press, New York: 1983.

⁶Slonimsky, Henry, *Essays*, HUC Press Quadrangle Books, New York: 1967.

⁷"Preparing for the New Machzor and the High Holy Days," *CCAR Journal, The Reform Jewish Quarterly*, CCAR Press, New York: Summer 2013)

Books and Articles

(which have helped to inform my thinking about this topic)

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