

KNOWING GOD WITH CERTAINTY

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There's a verse in the Torah that reads: “. . . הסכת ישמע ישראל היום הזה נהיית לעם ליהוה אלהיך (. . . keep silent and hear, Israel—this day you have become a people to Adonai your God). (Deuteronomy 27:9)

The Torah in this instance is directing us to stop talking and, instead, concentrate our attention—we can't talk and hear at the same time—to purposefully use our imagination to understand our relationship with God.

But for many of us, our relationship with God is tenuous. We often find it difficult to make sense of the images and characterizations of God that we encounter. Thinking and talking about God may often feel uncomfortable at best or a waste of time at worst.

So sometimes, to put it generously, we don't have any certainty about God.

A few years ago we had a conversation with a man in his 40s, the son of an elderly Jew who had just died. The son called to ask us to conduct the funeral. He informed us that he, the son, was “not a good Jew.” In fact, he repeated it several times in the conversation. Our talk revealed that he had doubts about God, that he didn't belong to a congregation, and that he didn't observe Jewish practices. At the time of his father's death, however, he was drawn to God, Torah, and Israel—to the infinite beyond himself (God), to the religious teachings and practices of Judaism (Torah), and to the Jewish people (Israel). Nonetheless, he felt constrained by what he had been, a non-Jewish Jew, virtually all his life.

It prompts us to ask, should we categorize ourselves as less Jewish or less worthy as Jews because we have doubts about God?

The basic measure of religious worthiness for Christians is *belief*—in Jesus; but for Jews the basic measure is *behavior*—how we act in respect to other human beings. Not surprisingly, our name as a people, “Israel,” connotes wrestling or struggling with God. And there is a long and respected tradition in Judaism, beginning with Abraham and continuing through Moses to the rabbis, of arguing with God.

As adults with doubts it may be more useful not to think of ourselves as bad Jews if our belief in God is less than certain, but instead—taking Dennis Prager's approach—to think of ourselves as “serious Jews,” actively struggling to find meaning in our Judaism.

Believing in God usually requires that we define what “God” means to us. By adulthood most of us have jettisoned the image of an old man with a beard, wearing robes, sitting on a great chair in the sky. Nor do we any longer imagine a puppeteer who pulls all the strings and controls every human thought and deed.

Our Sages and rabbis described God using an anthropomorphic vocabulary—God's hand, anger, compassion, etc.—but always understood that God is fundamentally a masterminding order of intelligence beyond our comprehension.

But what does it mean to say that God is an order of intelligence beyond our comprehension?

Consider the microbe swimming in our bloodstream. It too has a kind of intelligence; that is, it has the capacity to move in its environment—our bloodstream—in a predictable way. It looks out, with whatever limited sensory capability it possesses, and it “sees” an infinite universe—again, our bloodstream; and it cannot comprehend the intelligence in which it lives. We too are swimming in a stream of sorts and, when we look out, we too see a universe that appears infinite to us. We too are unable to comprehend the intelligence—what we call God—in whose domain we dwell.

Despite our common cosmic ecology, God's intelligence is unique and self-sufficient, as our intelligence is when compared to the intelligence of the microbe. God's intelligence, however, has no singular tangible form. What we know with certainty about this Divine Intelligence is that, as the Creator, its creation has a “rule book”—the Torah, a set of principles and precepts that describe the workings of the creation and how we are to interact with it, which we ignore at our peril.

This understanding may make sense to us, yet the portrayals of God in Tanakh (Hebrew Bible) and Siddur (prayer book) often seem incomprehensible or simply not believable.

Part of the problem may be that we're so over-invested in the material world that we don't have time for any religious learning that can't be conveyed in a 30-second TV news-style “sound bite.” But the Hebrew Bible and its portrayal of God cannot be digested and understood like television news. It contains not only information (the stuff of TV news) and knowledge (the substance of higher education), but also traditional *wisdom*. That is, it presents to us the historically validated moral lessons of life.

It would seem reasonable to think that if we simply sit down and read the Hebrew Bible, we should be able both to understand it and to appraise the usefulness of its wisdom. But because it represents a wisdom tradition from another historical time and cultural place, it's not that simple.

The first problem that many of us encounter comes from reading the Torah in translation, because all translations are misleading. Much of the Torah offers a vision and path for our lives by presenting illustrative stories, but the actual meaning of the stories is often lost in translation, because the language in which they occurred was not only a simple medium of communication, but also the vehicle that carried and expressed the unique values and characteristics of the culture in the myriad definitions and subtle nuances of its vocabulary stock—which are never adequately translated.

The second problem, returning to our disbelief in the Biblical portrayals of God, is that to comprehend the Hebrew text one must read it on four levels: *peshat*, *remez*, *drash*, and *sod*. *Peshat* is what we encounter at the “visible” level of Torah—it tells us who, what, when, why, where, and how of a story. *Remez* is the “analytical” level of Torah—it gives us meaning by contrast and comparison with similar words and phrases used elsewhere in the Torah. *Drash* is the “missing” level of Torah—it fills in the missing details, implications, and moral lessons. And *sod* is the “secret” level of Torah—it tells us ultimate meanings and interconnections, mystical understandings that reflect cosmic laws. Without reading commentary and *midrash* along with the text, much of the meaning is likely to escape us.

Many of us have invested a great deal of ourselves to gain a secular education, largely to earn our livelihood by doing work of our own choosing. But what if we have invested little or nothing to educate ourselves in the wisdom of a tradition that has a vision and path for our lives? Left with our doubts, we may find that our experience of God is often marginal in synagogue.

Our experience of God in other settings and situations, however, may be very intense. Personally, we've had some extraordinary spiritual experiences when backpacking and *davening* (praying) alone on a Shabbat morning in the wilderness. Moshe felt much closer to God when his parents died than he usually does at services, regardless of who's leading, the choice of liturgy, or the music that's sung. And Khulda has experienced spiritual awe as a member of a congregation that was acting to uphold justice and righteousness in the larger community.

Why then bother coming to services if we're struggling with our Judaism, trying to intensify our spiritual experience, and that usually doesn't happen in the synagogue sanctuary?

It may be that we are not spiritually fulfilled by worship services because we mistake the function of those services and thus mislead ourselves about their potential. We may come to services as passive consumers, expectantly waiting for the prayer leader or the liturgy or the music to lift us up close to God. But as someone once said about the mind, the spirit is less like an empty vessel to be filled and more like a muscle to be exercised.

Also, the relationship between our spirit and God is somewhat like a marriage: that which is beautiful is not necessarily loved, but that which is loved is necessarily beautiful.

So if we are to see the beauty of God in the worship service—if we are to feel spiritually connected when we're in the sanctuary—it's essential that we exercise our spirit before we come to synagogue and, again, after we leave, by *actively* loving all that which is beautiful and worthy.

Think of it this way: If six days of the week we are disconnected from Judaism, living lives in which God is not palpably present and in which our acts are not guided by Torah, why should we expect to go to synagogue on the seventh day and be spiritually uplifted? And, of course, we're inevitably disappointed on Shabbat after we have spent our week without maintaining the image of God in our consciousness as a guide to our actions.

But if we hold God in our minds and hearts throughout the week, seeking and securing every opportunity to do God's will in our actions with and toward others, when we return to synagogue on Shabbat we will experience the awe and joy of renewing our spirits and rededicating ourselves together as a holy community. We will find that the solidarity and celebration we share with others who are similarly primed will allow all of us to rise up spiritually together.

It's ironic that we do not come to know God with certainty directly from prayer, study, or intellectual inquiry, but from our day-to-day action to live in the image of God (action that is guided, of course, by that selfsame prayer, study, and intellectual inquiry). In this regard, there's an expression that illustrates the difference between Judaism and our daughter religion: in Christianity, god dies to save humanity; in Judaism, humanity lives—the Jewish people acts—to save God. Thus the Talmud quotes the prophet Hosea (4:6) on the importance of our action: “. . . If you have forgotten the Torah of your God, I also will forget your children” (Yoma 38b)

The Sforno, one of our great classical commentators, teaches: “Close your mouth and open your mind, so that your imagination will allow you to understand your covenant [relationship] with God, because if you do this you will keep the [Torah’s] *mitzvot* [commandments].”

When we keep the *mitzvot* we come to know God intimately, because we have personally exer-

cised our spiritual connection with the Creator. By exercising our spirit to do the will of God, we convincingly demonstrate to ourselves the power of goodness that the Creator has implanted within us—and it’s only when we come to know God from within that we know God with certainty.

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