

The Theology of Gratitude
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Kol Nidre 5772

Through my life, I have struggled to define my relationship with God – not just my relationship with God, but my thoughts about God's nature. In my early years, God was that beneficent "old man in the chair", wizened and white-haired as in Michelangelo's depiction on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. During my teenage encounters with spiritualism (those were the late 60's early 70's) God was a cosmic force behind the universe (wow, man). Then, I discovered Martin Buber, and God became the Eternal You – my friend who was discoverable in the most intimate of relationships. In college, I met Kant and Hegel and at the same time read the core texts of Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Jainism, Taoism – if it had an "ism", I was on it. I then encountered rabbinical school and the world of Jewish theology opened up to me, whether it was the early writings of Gersonides, Nachmanides, Maimonides, Halevi or Crescas or the more modern thinkers such as Ahad HaAm, Hermann Cohen, Mordecai Kaplan, my ole buddy Buber, Heschel and even the post-modern thinkers, my teacher Gene Borowitz or Judith Plaskow and Aviva Zornberg. Panoply of theological options lay open before me – a Chinese food menu! A shopping trip to Loehman's! What choices! I could have Plato's Unmoved Mover as my God, or Maimonides who aptly stated: I can't tell you what God is, but I can tell you what God isn't! Heschel whispered in my ear – God is in the surprises of life. Hermann Cohen said that Hegel was right, but he just wasn't Jewish, but God was in history.

I am now thirty years post those heady scholarly days in rabbinical school. I have sat with mourners and rejoicers, the questioning and the quarrelsome, the unbelievers and the true-believers. I have sat alone, with my head in my hands, praying – but to whom? For what? And as I am at the beginning of my dotage – with less life ahead of me than I have behind me, I can say with surety – that I believe – that I believe with perfect faith – Ani Ma'amim b'emuna shelayma. As the partisans during the Shoah sang about the Messiah's coming, I believe that there is a God: a God who listens and a God who cares. And I am a perfectly (well, debatable) sane person, who believes in evolution and physics and quantum science. And my God is above it all and behind it all.

As I recounted in my Erev Rosh HaShana sermon, there are many who dismiss theology and religion, and while I may have dismissed those thinkers as simple, in reality there are complex and cogent arguments offered by thoughtful people who live their lives as good people, without the need for the presence of the divine in their lives. So be it. But I cannot imagine a day in my life in which I was not in search of, or in conversation with ... that which I will call God.

At the beginning of my rabbinate I spent much time dealing with the names of God. In the Biblical text, to know one's name is to know one's nature. Perhaps through the names of God, we might understand God's essence. But I found that most names that we humans applied to God were of our own creation, and thus limiting. Names like Judge, Father, King, Avinu Malkaynu, Adonai, Holy One, Healer, -- all of these names restrict and constrain God. To call God, "Father" and then to know one's own father, there is a disconnect -- I used to joke that if God were like my late beloved father, Jerry Granatour, we were all in deep trouble (and he was a great father). To call God "Healer", and if God didn't heal the person whom we loved who was sick, then God couldn't be a Healer. To call God "Judge", and if God didn't Judge in the way we deemed appropriate, then God wasn't a Judge -- or didn't exist. And from there, I found myself swimming in the Maimonidian sea -- all we can know, is what God is not.

I looked to figures who wrestled with this challenge. In the Jerusalem Talmud there is a statement about four rabbinic sages who went in search of God (the text says: entered paradise) *"Four [sages] entered paradise—Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Acher, and Akiba. Ben Azzai looked and died; Ben Zoma went mad; Acher destroyed the plants; Akiba alone came out unhurt."* (Talmud Hag. 14b). This short phrase became the basis for Milton Steinberg's brilliant historical novel -- and one of my favorite books of all time: *As a Driven Leaf* (Behrman House; 1939). Acher (the different one -- or the other one) was the Talmudic nickname of Rabbi Elisha ben Abuya, one of the greatest minds of his time.

Elisha garnered this moniker of Acher as he was known to have deeply studied Greek thought, had a prodigious appetite for women and wine, and hung out with people who were known as the Minim -- sectarians -- separatists. He ventured so far beyond the pale of normative rabbinic Judaism; it is as if he left the fold. In Steinberg's book Elisha becomes a heroic and then tragic figure. But what of his apostasy -- (which the Talmud called "destroying the plants," a way of describing the wonton violation of Jewish law)? There is a law in the book of Deuteronomy: *"If, along the road, you chance upon a bird's nest, in any tree or on the ground, with fledglings or eggs and the mother sitting over the fledglings or on the eggs, do not take the mother together with her young. Let the mother go, and take only the young, in order that you may fare well and have a long life."* (Deuteronomy 22:6-7). The Midrash recounts: Elisha was out and about and

noticed a young child who had been sent by his parents to gather eggs for a meal. The lad climbed a tree to drive away the mother bird from the nest before he took the eggs. In front of Elisha's horrified eyes, the boy slipped and fell to his death. Elisha's faith was ripped apart by this experience: here was a child fulfilling two Mitzvot – honoring his parents, and showing concern for a mother bird. Instead of receiving the gift of long life as promised by the Torah, the boy died. (I am very to Rabbi Stanley David for reminding me of this episode in his WUPJ Ki Tetzei Dvar Torah).

A dear friend of mine – a person of great wisdom and even greater faith -- recalled being in the doctor's office when receiving a diagnosis of cancer. He admits that his first immediate reaction was: "What did I do to deserve this? Why did this happen to me? Where is the justice in this?" And then he was able to stop himself and pose new questions: "What am I to do about this? What do I need to get through this? What can I learn from this? What can I teach about this?"

We are all confronted with pain – from within and without. We see injustice and evil, we experience disappointments and crashing defeats -- it is enough to poison the spirit – it is enough to devastate the soul. Elisha ben Abuya left the community of faith. So many people who survived the Shoah, found themselves alive and without faith. But then, there were those who survived with faith intact.

And I, too, have experienced loss and pain and disappointment. I, too, have watched the righteous die and the wicked succeed. From where can we find the well-spring of faith?

Whenever I was ready to rail against God – I would stop myself and try to recall the moments of triumph and joy that I had experienced. I knew in those moments I would always find a way to recite a prayer of thanksgiving – a shehechyanu (Thank you God, for giving me {us} life, sustaining me {us}, and allowing me {us} to experience this precious moment). When I sat with a person in a moment of mourning who would ask me, "Rabbi, where is this God of yours, now?" I would ask, "When you experienced the most wonderful moments, did you not recognize the possibility that it wasn't just luck or good fortune, but that God was there, too? And if that is the case, then this moment of pain will not be easier, but it will be less lonely." When in pain, I know that I am not alone.

Again, I look to Deuteronomy. As Moses prepares the people to venture into the Promised Land – he tells them to always remember the source of all goodness and favor. He reminds them that God forgave the people after the episode of the Golden Calf and gave the people, through Moses, the second set of tablets. Chapter 8 – verse 10 – a very simple command: *When you have eaten your fill, give thanks.*

This command gave rise to the Birkat HaMazon – the blessing after the meal. But the concept is so simple – train yourself to be grateful for life’s little things. To you and me, a meal is something that happens on a thrice-daily basis (for some of you who like to snack, double that). But we know that there are those who look to others for their next meal – this congregation, in partnership with PACC and other local congregations serves over 200 hot lunches to people each Saturday. We must learn to be grateful – for that is when we come to know God.

So, after a more than half a life-time in search for God, I find God in moments of gratitude. Those moments of satisfaction and joy help sustain me through those horrific moments of loss or pain or defeat.

Rabbi William Shakespeare, otherwise known as RABARD (Rabbi Bard) taught me so much – so much that it took me 45 years to learn. In my first year of Junior High School, we were given the task of memorizing Shakespeare’s 29th sonnet, which I now present as an essential element of my “Theology of Gratitude.”

When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
(Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth) sings hymns at heaven’s gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

Shakespeare may well have pitched this to his muse, the “dark lady.” But for me, it is God’s love that brings such wealth – that love found in life’s most simple and precious moments. And with a myriad of things for which I am grateful, I can weather most any storm. It never lessens the pain – but I am certainly not alone in those dark moments – I am suffused with God’s presence. And I am sustained by that Holy Presence.

Yes, like Maimonides, the RAMBAM, I cannot tell you what God is – any feeble attempt on my part, employing even the loftiest “high-priced” words, would limit God. But I can point out where God is, in my life – and it is that presence that grounds me each and every day.

Three times a day, in the Amidah (the central prayer of the synagogue service) we say: Modim anachnu lach – you have heard me sing it – We Thank You God for all your gifts – here is the full text of the prayer:

We gratefully acknowledge that You are our Eternal God, the God of our people, the God of all generations. You are the rock of our life, the Power that shields us in every age. We thank You and sing Your praises: for our lives which are in Your hand; for our souls, which are in Your keeping; for the signs of Your presence we encounter every day; and for Your wondrous gifts at all times: morning noon, and night. You are Goodness: Your mercies never end; You are Compassion: Your love will never fail. You have always been our hope. For all these things, O Sovereign God, let Your name be forever exalted and blessed. Let all who live affirm You and praise Your name in truth. Blessed are You, O God, Your name is Goodness and to You we give praise and thanks!

This is meant as a thrice daily reminder to keep our eyes open to God’s presence, which shows itself in the gifts of life – even those common gifts such as a hot meal, a warm place to lie down, satisfaction in accomplishment, a smile, a kiss, a laugh, a sigh, a moment of respite from a day of tension. We must open our eyes and open our hearts – to know these momentary joys is to feel the poke in the ribs from God, saying, “I’m here, too.”

Baruch Ata Adonai, Elohaynu Melech HaOlam, She’hechyanu, v’ki’amanu, v’higi’anu lazman hazeh. Blessed are You, O God, Ruler of the Universe, who gave us life, sustained us, and allowed us to experience this unique moment.

Say that several times a day, and you, too, will never be alone.

GMAR CHATIMA TOVA – MAY YOU ALL BE INSCRIBED IN THE BOOK OF LIFE FOR BLESSING!