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God, Light, and Yom Kippur
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A teacher came up to me after Sunday School with a troubled look on her face. “Rabbi,” she said, “Help! A student told me he doesn’t believe in God, and I didn’t know what to say.” “Did he give you a reason?” I asked. “Because usually I find that the God people don’t believe in, is a God I don’t believe in either.”

I share this conversation because quite often, “the God people don’t believe in” bears a striking resemblance to the description of God in our High Holiday *machzor*. If we were to imagine a picture based on that description, it would be of a figure sitting on a throne, looking at a list of deeds, counting up sins, and deciding destinies. Now I have to be honest. I find this image to be troubling and disturbing.

In life, even in the best of circumstances, when a person receives exactly what they deserve, this image creates a problem. Do we really want to pray to a God who spends His existence judging our actions? Aren’t there enough people judging us already? Parents, spouses, teachers, neighbors, co-workers, bosses, friends; sometimes it feels like we’re constantly looking over our shoulder wondering what people are going to say about us, or about our children. And all this worrying about what others think – it takes a toll. Do we really need God to do that to us as well?

And if this image isn’t challenging enough when life goes the way it should, it becomes utterly terrifying when things go wrong. What should we think when misfortune strikes someone we know, who did nothing to deserve it? In those times, this image leaves us shaken. It leads us to wonder if maybe our friend or loved one wasn’t the person we thought they were, and was punished for some secret sin. This is such a cruel, disheartening, hurtful way to respond to tragedies. And what makes it worse is, we know it isn’t true, because bad things happen to good people all the time.

So what should we believe? Is it that God is not so good at His job? Or maybe, that God really *isn’t* judging our deeds and deciding our fate. In either case, it leaves us questioning this entire enterprise. Perhaps we’d be better off believing that life is a series of random events, in which case we have no need for God at all.

A few years ago I attended a retreat where Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, a scholar and mystic, presented two different concepts of God. In each case, God’s essence is the same. God is the author of creation, the source of life and goodness. Where the concepts differ is in God’s nature, and the relationship we can have with God.

Kushner’s first concept was based on the teachings of Maimonides, who believed that God is beyond the ability of human beings to comprehend. Even if we spent our entire lives learning and searching, as Maimonides did, the chasm between an infinite God and a finite human mind is so profound that it’s unbridgeable. Regardless of the quality of our lives or the greatness of our deeds – even if we were as righteous as Moses, we would never be able to “know” God, or “see” God’s face.

If God is unreachable, then what is the purpose of religion? According to Maimonides, religion provides its adherents with a guidebook. By studying this guide we learn the best way to manage our journey.

Each day there are dozens of paths in front of us. Some are incredibly interesting, and others leave us lost. Some lead to dead ends, while others take us up to the greatest of heights. Unfortunately, there are no signs at the beginning of each path telling us where they're headed. We're kind of on our own. So how do we know where we're going? By using the guidebook.

Now if we're good scouts, if we're faithful, loyal, and true, then over time when we look back and see where we've been, we'll appreciate the journey and what we accomplished along the way. At some point, we'll realize that those accomplishments are the blessings of life. So study that guidebook, keep it close to your heart, follow its instructions, share it with your children, and your journey will bring fulfillment. It will be fulfilling even though God is unreachable.

For the second concept, Rabbi Kushner gave an image of God that comes from the Kabbalists and mystics. In this approach, rather than create the world and remain separate from it; at the moment God said: "Let there be light," God's presence was suffused into every molecule and element of creation. God's spirit saturated every beam of light, drop of water, and breath of air. It filled every creature's lungs and nourished their souls. It enabled seeds to sprout; became embedded in the fiber of plants, and gave strength to metal and stone. God's spirit became one with the human soul, with the sun, and the stars. There was no place on this planet, no place in the universe where God was not. Indeed, just the opposite: God IS. God is, was, and always will be.

According to this conception, God's presence is joyful and pervades all life. In a barren wilderness, it is how a drop of water enables a plant to grow; how a drop of knowledge causes a mind to blossom; and how a tiny act of kindness causes love to bloom. More than beautiful landscapes, we are surrounded by the presence of God, which lies dormant; quietly, silently waiting for us to be God's partner and activate it.

As opposed to the first concept, which offers a Godly path through life, with no connection to God; this one offers a hopeful, spiritual adventure, where fulfillment comes, not from following the "right" path, but from opening our heart to encounter God at any moment of the night or day.

According to Rabbi Kushner, God need not be a cosmic vending machine, doling out reward and punishment in proportion to our deeds. Instead, we can believe in a distant God who gave us a guidebook to show us the way. Or we can believe in a God that is present at every moment, quietly waiting to be recognized and bring us love, light, joy and peace.

While I relate to both of the concepts Rabbi Kushner presented, they left me in a quandary. After all, even a kindergartener knows the *Shema*, that there is only one God. So how is possible for two contradictory images to both be true? It's not possible for God to be unreachable and also be eternally present. And if God is unknowable, than how can I see God's face in my encounter with all things? I pondered this question for some time, for years actually. And eventually I found an answer. But surprisingly, I found it in science.

Although many people believe that religion and science oppose each other; that religion demands the acceptance of tenets of faith, whether or not they are scientifically true, this is not the Jewish approach. Instead, Judaism encourages an inquisitive mind and a search for answers, whether our questions pertain to the meaning of sacred texts, or to the ways of the world. For we who live in this modern age, the discoveries of science open a door to the majesty of the world, the miracle of creation, and can

sometimes help unravel theological mysteries that we would be hard pressed to understand on our own, as is the case here.

Since the Middle Ages, scientists struggled to define the properties of light. They saw that when a ray of light was shined towards a mirror it reflected the light away from it. Thus, they concluded, light must be comprised of tiny particles. A great deal of research was done on this hypothesis and it was demonstrably proven to be true. Light is made up of particles.

But there was a problem with this definition. It didn't explain the appearance of certain natural phenomena like rainbows. If light is composed of particles, then what is a rainbow? In seeking to answer this question scientists concluded that light needs to be understood as a wave . A great deal of research was done on this hypothesis and it was demonstrably proven to be true. Light is a wave .

For hundreds of years now, scientists have argued over how to define the properties of light; whether it should be defined as being comprised of tiny, discrete particles, or as an all-encompassing wave. Scientists know that both of these understandings are true and have made great discoveries on the basis of each of them. That said, scientists also know that light cannot be both a particle and a wave at the same time. Light is one or the other. To be both would be a contradiction. It would be impossible.

I've sometimes wondered why God chose to start creation with light rather than some other type of element. Why didn't God begin creation with land, or water, or air? God could have begun by creating our planet first, and then working outward, or by making the sun and then working in. God could have chosen to create the world in any fashion He desired. So why begin with light? Perhaps God chose light because, in studying its essence, we learn something about the essence of God as well.

If light is both particles and waves, then why can't God be beyond human comprehension and discoverable in the wisp of a cloud, the migration of a bird, or the murmuring of a child, all at the same time. If light is defined by two qualities that can't exist together, then why can't that same duality apply to God. God can be near and distant, absent, and present, known and unknowable, merciful and just. More than a first act of creation, light helps us understand the nature of God.

As is God, so too is Yom Kippur. If we listen to the *machzor* – our prayerbook, this is a day of judgment: a day when God judges, and a day when we are called to judge ourselves. It is a day to open up the guidebook and see where we stand. Are we on the right path or have we drifted? If we drifted, and who hasn't, then this day calls us to turn; to turn and return to the path.

But there is a second approach to Yom Kippur that has nothing to do with judgment, and everything to do with mercy, acceptance and love. According to the great mystic, Rabbi Akiva, on Yom Kippur, God Himself purifies Israel and gives us a fresh, clean start. Akiva learns this because God is referred to as Mikveh Yisrael, as the purifier of Israel.

What is a mikveh? It's a ritual bath filled with living waters. It's a place one goes to wash away impurities and make a fresh start. It's a place that one enters alone, after taking off all their coverings, their clothes and make-up, letting go of their artifice and ego, stripping themselves bare so that nothing stands between them and God.

If you put your hope in God, Akiva says, if you let go of your coverings and stand as you truly are, your flaws revealed, your mistakes uncovered, your sorrows laid bare, God will embrace you in love and grant you an opportunity to start anew.

Rather than a day of wrath and anger, Yom Kippur is a day of love, a day of warm embrace, a day on which we are offered a gift. But if we want to accept this gift, we need to do a little work. After all, there's no such thing as free love. What does God ask of us on this day? Only that we take the time to be honest with ourselves about who we are, about what we're doing, and about where we've been headed. It's not easy. It can't be accomplished in the next 30 minutes, but it can be done.

This is a day of judgment, not the judgment of our parents, spouses, teachers, neighbors, co-workers, bosses, or friends; not even the judgment of God. This is our day to judge ourselves; to see ourselves as we truly are. If we make the effort, God will love us for it. We need no ego or artifice, no coverings or jewelry to be loved; we only need to be true to ourselves.

This is a day of judgment, but it is also a day of love. Be kind to yourself. Be honest with yourself. Accept yourself as you are. Let go of the judgments of others. Allow yourself to feel loved by God. Allow yourself a fresh start. You deserve it.

May this Yom Kippur herald a year of courage, honesty, growth, and renewal. May it be a year of living fully, embracing opportunities, and a year of being loved. Amen