

GOD TALK

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Congregation Agudath Israel

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About a month ago, I had a conversation with RAL about sermon topics and we realized that we both were planning to talk about hope. I came back the next day and said, Rabbi Lucas, I'll give you hope and I will take God.

And the day after that, I wondered: What was I thinking?

Why *should* I talk about God? God is at the core of how Jewish people cope in hard times, cultivate hope, work for a better future: It all begins and ends with God.

So why aren't more sermons about God? Because it's so hard. Already I feel half the room crossing your arms as if to say, What can you possibly say? And I feel the other half of the sanctuary... yup, crossing your arms as if to say, God has absolutely nothing to do with me and my concerns.

In his book *Who Needs God*, R. Harold Kushner wrote: I love God as presented in the religious tradition out of which I come, and I love the several hundred members of the congregation I serve. The enduring frustration of my rabbinic career has been my inability to get my two loves to find and love each other.

A story is told of a couple who receives a telegram, telling them a relative has died and left extremely valuable property. They were to contact the rabbi for details. With great excitement, they went to the rabbi, only to be told that the dead relative was Moses and the valuable property was connection to God through the Jewish religion. As the story goes, this couple was deeply disappointed that the legacy was religious wisdom and not real estate in Manhattan.

But I don't think my two loves, God and all of you, are so far apart. So uncross your metaphorical arms and let's give this a try together!

Let's establish that I use the word God. You might say HaShem, fence around a fence. *And that's okay.* You might say Power in the Universe, Energy that Created All: universalist. *And that's okay.* You might say HKB, Healer, Rock, HaMakom, Great Gift Wrapper on High: *And that's okay.* Even Moshe didn't get a straight answer; God told him I am that I am, Ehyeh asher ehyeh. At R"H we say: Avinu Malkenu: our Father, our King. I might say Our Parent Our Sovereign. It's all good. I'm going to say God, and you translate it into whatever name you prefer.

Next issue: Who am I to say anything about God? I struggle just like you. Yes, as a rabbi, God talk is in my job description. That doesn't mean I can speak with any more coherency than anyone else. Like you, I just have lots of questions. Who is God? What does God want of us? How are we, finite beings, meant to be in relationship with God, an infinite being. Even mathematically it seems to be an impossibility.

Many here may want to stop me right now and say there IS NO God. You may be right. But today we're going to engage in a thought experiment. I hope all of us will go there together. The truth is, one has to be very frum to be a *true* atheist. Know what I mean? You have to KNOW absolutely that there is no God. It takes a lot of belief. And here's another thing: You say you don't believe in God and I'll say: Tell me about the God you don't believe in and I probably don't believe in that God either.

One more ground rule for our God talk. This is not theology class. I could teach the history of conceptions of God and the parameters of theology in Judaism. But I am not so interested in engagement with your intellect.

I want to speak about God in a way that connects our hearts to each other, that bypasses our minds and touches our souls.

So I start where I always start. Look to today's Torah reading. The Akedah, the binding of Isaac, is an intense, pivotal moment of human connection to God and presents at least three possible answers to the questions of what God wants and how we are meant to be in relationship with God.

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּקְרָא יְהוָה אֶת-אַבְרָהָם

We read today: Sometime afterward, God tested Abraham.

The first, obvious theological model is the one being tested: Abraham. What is his belief system in God?

Isaac presents another, Sarah in her absence from the scene – another.

Abraham is our theological model of the trusting, faithful believer. His relationship with God is foundational. God is his creator, commander, teacher and intimate havruta. God is the great promiser, the One who Abraham recognized and therefore now recognizes Abraham. What God commands, Abraham does. What God promises, Abraham believes, even against all contradictory reality. So the **Abraham-Theology** is that **God is not only the unity of everything in the universe but also is involved in human lives, intimate with chosen individuals, and always dependable**. When circumstances refute this version of God, Abraham simply pushes through, believing that God knows what God is doing.

In our narrative, God has told Abraham to bring his beloved son Isaac to a distant mountain and offer Isaac there as a sacrifice. And Abraham gets up early in the morning without complaint and sets out. What is Abraham thinking during the three-day walk? He has

grounds to challenge God. He could invoke God's promise for his posterity; Isaac is, after all, the key to the future God promised of a people as innumerable as stars in the sky. He could remind God of their mutual commitment to doing what is just and right. Abraham says nothing at all. Maybe he thinks that he will pass this test as he has passed God's other tests. Maybe he will validate God's choosing him as the exemplar of faith. And once vindicated, God would do the right thing and spare his son. I imagine Abraham ruminating to himself: If I know anything about God after dedicating my entire life to God, then I know this is God who would not expect a father to sacrifice his son. If God does actually want this sacrifice, then what is the point of faith and loyalty? What even is the point of sparing Isaac if this is God? **Abraham-belief says that even when things look as bad as they can be, God has a plan, and God fulfills promises.** This is belief in God against all odds.

Next, what does **Isaac** believe about God? On that fateful third day of travel, Isaac sees the firestone and the wood; but wonders where the sheep is for the burnt offering. His father

tells him, אֱלֹהִים יִרְאֶה-לּוֹ הַשֶּׁה לְעֹלָה בְּנִי

God will see to the sheep for the offering, my son. In the very next verse, the story picks up lightning speed as Abraham builds the altar, lays out the wood, binds Isaac, places him on the altar and lifts that knife to kill his son. Yes, Isaac's life is preserved in the very next verse as an angel of God calls out Abraham's name from heaven twice and stops him from killing his son. Yes, we know the story.

But let's rewind for a moment. We read

וַיִּשְׁלַח אַבְרָהָם אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיִּקַּח אֶת-הַמַּאֲכָלֹת לְשַׁחֵט אֶת-בְּנוֹ:

Abraham picked up the knife to slay his son. And let's pause here **before**:

וַיִּקְרָא אֵלָיו מִלֶּאךָ יְהוָה מִן-הַשָּׁמַיִם

that angel calling out to Abraham to stop him.

Imagine Isaac bound on the altar as his father follows the directive of this God about whom Isaac has heard all his life. This God who would see to the sheep for the sacrifice. As Isaac looks up at his father's arm yielding the knife, as he realizes that HE is the sheep, he comes face to face with his own mortality. He realizes in that brief, agonizing moment that he could die, and more: that one day he *would* die.

Isaac theology is unshakable belief in God borne of tragedy, trauma, desperation, and loss. Isaac has survived a terrifying encounter with God's mysterious demands. All that he learned prior to that day was called into question: who really is his father and what are his priorities? Who is this God who would demand such behavior from a righteous person? Yet, I don't think that Isaac turned away from God due to his life-altering trauma. No, I think Isaac turned *toward* God. Isaac heard the angel of God stop his father and produce a ram in a nearby bush. Isaac's God brings about personal miracles.

How so? After the Akedah, we encounter Isaac once again walking in the fields. Midrash suggests that Isaac was davening Minchah, praying and meditating in the afternoon, communing with his heart and searching his soul. Many people come to believe in God this Isaac way – moving through or recovering from life’s inevitable losses with a deep devotion to God. God saved me as Psalms says: MI-PI ARYEH from the lion’s mouth... MEI-RESHET ZU TAMNU LI from the net laid for me. Isaac Theology is not an irrefutable belief system; yet it’s hard to shake the feeling of gratitude to God Who cares about me personally after getting a second chance.

Finally, what can we learn about **Sarah’s** theology? Sarah isn’t even here in this narrative. Sarah wasn’t there as her beloved, yearned for child of her old age is taken away in stealth, early in the morning, by her husband of so many years. Rabbinic commentary notices Sarah’s absence from this narrative too. Midrash depends upon the very next verse after the Akedah that says: Sarah died in Kiryat Arba, now Hebron, in the land of Canaan. Midrash teaches that Sarah went to Hebron, looking for her husband and her son. There, the Satan revealed to her that Abraham intended to sacrifice her son. Sarah’s heart breaks of sorrow and she dies. **Sarah theology is that it is NOT true that God gives us only what we can bear. Sometimes God gives us more than we can possibly handle and we are broken beyond repair.**

Before considering how these three different God-beliefs play out in our lives, I want to think with you about **God** in this Akedah text. Rabbi Neil Gillman suggests that implicit in the narrative is the idea that God was being tested as well.

God’s command to bind and sacrifice Isaac will determine the strength of Abraham’s loyalty, **but it will also test God’s ability to inspire that loyalty.** Will God be able to point to Abraham as the model of what God can expect of a human? R Gillman asks us to consider a vulnerable God who needs proof of loyalty and devotion. This is a big ask for many of us.

The vision of God most of us developed in childhood is a God of ultimate perfection. All powerful, all knowing, God has no failing, no lack, no need. Judaism is the source of this philosophical portrait of an omnipotent, omniscient, all loving God. This Perfect God is in our prayer life, our codes of law, our ritual life. In fact this is the picture of God that even atheists carry around; this is the God they don’t believe in. Because if God is not all this, what is God?

A careful consideration of Torah, however, shows us that this is not God in the Torah at all. God may be the Creator of all, but God’s will and hopes for the civilization God created are constantly flouted. God makes mistakes, gets angry, feels regret, and can even be insecure. God is in need of humans, in need of recognition by humanity.

This point feels important because while I have talked (and talked) about God, Rabbi Gillman requires the acknowledgment that we have only human language to speak about

God. God's presence is obscured or revealed by how we are educated to see the world. Leaves rustle in the breeze because an easterly wind moves in our direction at 12 miles per hour with enough force to move the smaller branches of the tree. OR: Leaves rustle in the wind because God is whispering to my five-year-old grandson that he is not alone, that God will always keep him company, that he is secure in the world as he knows it. Carmel may not remember that I told him this God metaphor according to my Myth of God. But perhaps, when he is old enough to learn about weather patterns, he will also have the poetry to identify Divine clues in those very weather patterns.

God is. And we humans do our best to find language to describe God. We may call God Perfect or we may say that God is close by in my very heart. God doesn't change, but we do. Sometimes in our lives we have Abraham, Isaac or Sarah theology. I have my own experience to support such a statement. As a child, I was an Abraham believer. God was close to me, all-loving, in the difficult moments of an often confusing and sometimes frightening childhood. I had no doubt. I was an Isaac believer as a cancer survivor. I really did experience a personal miracle and while I knew that it was theologically indefensible, I believed that God saved me to fulfill my purpose in life. And I experienced a terrifying year and a half with Sarah theology, after a traumatic and painful heart episode, I was thrown into anxiety and depression. God was nowhere to be seen. My belief in God during those long months died as I fell apart.

In congregant visits this week before R"H, I heard statements of all three theologies. "I don't know why I have it so hard in my later years, but God has a plan for me." "My surgery went well even though the doctor wasn't sure it would work. God wants me around I guess." "I hear you making a prayer for my health, Rabbi, but God left me when my precious daughter died and God hasn't shown up again. Abraham. Isaac. Sarah.

I assume it's true for you too. I assume that you've had moments of Abraham, Isaac and Sarah theology at play in your mind and heart. If we can be flexible with our assumptions about what God is (and isn't) – God might be present to you too. Let go of the angry Man of War, the Judge on the throne, the vengeful God of the Desert, the frightening Revealer of Law – let God just be. And enter this thought experiment with me.

What is your thought picture when I ask you to imagine God? Blue sky with clouds, old, bearded man on a throne, arms embracing you? What is your picture?

What do you *feel* when I ask you to imagine a moment of connection to God? A beating of your heart, a rush to your head, a desire to sing? What does it feel like?

Now, what is your name for God in this moment? Choose any one name and know that it will change.

Can you return to such a picture, feeling, name when you need Divine connection?

Let's say you believe in God or even that you're willing to float the possibility of God in your life. So what? What difference does it make?

Belief in God requires that the world be perfected in righteousness. Contrary to all evidence, human life matters. We are to walk in God's ways, specifically with justice and compassion. Living a life that includes God lifts us to a heightened place where our lives have purpose.

And this is why I gave Rabbi Lucas hope and in the deal, took God. My belief in God makes me more of an optimistic, dedicated, thoughtful person. My belief in God gives me a sense of mission and possibility. It grants me the opportunity to wake up most days with a sense that I can make a difference, and that I know what is really important. And wouldn't I want to share that with you? My family, friends, community? Judaism offers all this in a beautifully wrapped package of values, text, tradition and law. Are you going to leave that gift on the table unopened?

You've just received a telegram that a relative has died and you've inherited valuable property. When you follow the directions and speak to your rabbi for details, I hope you won't be disappointed. The relative is Moshe Rabbeinu, Moses our Teacher, and your inheritance is the Jewish religion and our connection to God. Use your legacy well! L'shanah Tovah Tikateivu.