

## **GOD – TORAH - ISRAEL**

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Shana tova!

Shortly after the High Holidays last year a congregant came up to me and asked, Rabbi, can you talk to us about why we should come to temple if we don't believe in God? He didn't ask this in a sarcastic or rude way. But rather, it was a very honest and heartfelt question. He was searching for an answer that would enable him to have a more meaningful experience during services, and I presume, increase his comfort level with the religious aspects of Judaism in general.

When I was asked the question, "why should we come to services if we don't believe in God," the question made me pause. Because while I *do* believe in God, it has rarely been my belief in God that has compelled me to come to services, to participate in the Jewish community, or even to become a rabbi.

In many ways, and like many Jews, I often have seen my faith as something personal, something that, at times, feels almost too private to talk about.

And to be honest, I am not always consistent in about what I mean when I talk about God. It can be something quite different when I am praying at the bedside of someone who is ill, or when I am engaged in a debate about social justice, when I am studying a sacred text from an academic perspective, when I am sitting on a beach, or if I've been stuck in traffic a little too long.

Part of what caught me off guard with the question, was the fact that even when I have not been serving as a pulpit rabbi, what motivated me to come to services was rarely because I was seeking a connection to the Divine. I can find that anywhere. I come to services because I am seeking a connection with my community.

One of my favorite Rosh Hashanah services was many years ago when I had first moved to D.C., I didn't know that many people yet, and virtually no one from outside of work. I went to services in a large auditorium at George Washington University.

While the Cantor was chanting the familiar High Holiday liturgy, I looked around this vast hall, where I knew maybe 3 people, and I was overwhelmed by a feeling of being at home.

Because as I looked around, I realized that most everyone here was just like me. They had also come from different parts of the country, they too were far from family, but they were here for the same reason I was. Because on Rosh Hashanah, I wanted to be with my community. I wanted to be surrounded by people who could hum the same tunes, chant

the same prayers, be ready to critique whatever the rabbi was going to talk about, and to complain that services were too long.

For me, what makes synagogue worship spiritual, or meaningful, is dependent on a large part on either how much of a connection I am able to make with those who are in the room with me, or how much of a connection I am seeking to have with those who have come before me.

That is not to say that God, or even the idea of God, is not a central to the Jewish faith, or a significant part of synagogue worship. It is. But it is only one of three central pillars upon which Judaism stands, and it is only one of the components of a synagogue service. God, Torah and Israel are not only the three pillars upon which Jewish life rests, but they are also the three gateways into the synagogue, and by extension into Judaism itself.

There has never been just one way into the community, or just one way to express one's Jewish identity. The concepts of God, Torah and Israel are the three portals through which we can enter into Judaism. Each represents a core value as well as a way for us to connect emotionally with Jewish life.

**God** ó This word means different things to different people. And throughout Jewish writings, and even throughout the Bible itself, there are vastly different expressions of theology. But *the idea* of God throughout Jewish history has been to motivate us to seek a higher truth, and a deeper meaning in life.

The pursuit of understanding the Divine has driven us to demand more of ourselves and more of our society. Whether we believe in God or not, the idea of God has impressed on our community the belief that we are accountable for the way we live our lives, both as individuals and as a people.

When the prophets speak about God, they are speaking of a moral presence, a source of universal truth and justice, an idea, and an ideal that is meant to motivate us to treat others with both compassion and righteousness, and to live in a way that models morality and ethical action.

And when the Rabbis of the Talmud speak about God, they speak of the Holy One entrusting us with this world, reminding us that our responsibility focuses on the here and now, rather than on the World to Come.

Even for those who do not believe in God, the idea of God, or of a universal truth that compels us to search for the sacred in all of humanity, drives us to try to live a life of meaning.

The second principal - **Torah** ó means more than sacred text and study, it is the demand that Judaism puts on us to constantly stretch our minds through study. And not just study for its own sake, but study so that we raise our consciousness and become motivated to act in the world in a way that reflects our highest ideals.

The prayer *Shema Yisroel* from the daily morning liturgy, where we praise the Creator for the commandment to be immersed in the study of Torah, summarizes the basic mitzvot that we should be doing on a regular basis. These are:

Honoring our parents,  
Performing acts of love and kindness,  
Attending the house of study daily, morning and night,  
Providing hospitality to the stranger,  
Visiting the sick,  
Celebrating with Bride and Groom,  
Escorting the dead,  
Praying with sincerity,  
and making peace where there is strife.

But it concludes with these important words:

*V'talmud torah k'neged kulam* ó and the study of Torah is equal to them all.

Why our tradition asks? Because the study of Torah should lead to them all. We study so that we will do. In Judaism when it comes to a debate of creed verses deed, deed is almost always more important.

All of the mitzvot that are mentioned in this prayer require us to actively participate in the life of our community. Even the commandment to pray implies how we should conduct ourselves when participating in communal prayer. We are to conduct ourselves in a respectful manner, because we might influence someone else's experience.

This prayer is a reminder that even as we question whether or not there is a God, we are expected to engage in Tzedakah, in Tikkun Olam, in study and in participating in the life of the community.

The Torah is not meant to be seen as a history book as much as a guide on how to live a good and decent life, a code of conduct for ethical behavior, and an inspiration about how to give meaning to everyday actions.

The gateway of Torah into Jewish life is what has motivated generations of Jews to be engaged in Tikkun Olam. Our most important values, how we treat one another, our obligations to the poor, the stranger, the widow and the orphan, our obligations to the planet and to the animals, all of these are rooted in our sacred texts.

As I said, Judaism is a religion based on action even more than faith. But without ongoing study, how will we understand how those values apply to our lives, and our community?

When we come to services, we come not only to pray, but also to learn, from the text, from our tradition, and from each other.

The third principal - **Israel** ó is often misunderstood. Up until 60 years ago, in any text or conversation when we spoke about *Yisroel* what we meant was not the modern nation ó but of all of us. Israel has always been synonymous with the Jewish people.

This concept of "Israel," when we speak of God, Torah and Israel refers to peoplehood, community, culture, and a connection to our own families and to *clal yisrael* the entirety of the Jewish people.

The modern state of Israel is not separate from that concept, but rather, it is included in it.

When we speak of the core value of Israel of peoplehood we are reminded that we share a history and a destiny with not only those in our own congregation, or our own town, but with a people who have been scattered throughout the world.

Just as when something happens to one person in our family, we are all affected by it, this principle applies to Jewish peoplehood as well.

For many Jews, this is what keeps them engaged in Jewish life. A sense of connection and responsibility for one another.

Sometimes this pressure comes from outside our community, such as with anti-Semitism which reminds us that to many, regardless of what we believe, of how observant we are, or even if we're not involved in Jewish life at all, to some, we are seen only as Jews, we are other, something to be reviled or feared.

But the pressure, or inspiration also comes from within. Jewish aid societies, political Zionism, international movements, such as the World Union of Progressive Judaism, remind us that we have ongoing responsibilities to those in our larger Jewish family who are less blessed than we are, whether those individuals live next door or around the world.

In the words of a famous 70's pop song that is played at many a Bar Mitzvah and wedding reception: we are family.

From Abraham to today, those born into our community, those who have claimed it for themselves, those who have joined us in marriage and friendship, we have a responsibility towards one another.

These three ideas of God, Torah and Israel, are not three separate ideas, disconnected from one another. Like a three legged stool, take away any one of the legs and the stool collapses.

And this is how it has always been with Judaism. If we take away any one of the three, God, Torah or Israel, our foundation as a community is jeopardized.

That is not to say that we all need to be equally involved in all three aspects. Rather, it is a *recognition* that different types of individuals support our community.

There is an old joke about a Mr. Schwartz. He was an avowed atheist, yet he went to shul every day. Finally one of his neighbors couldn't take it any longer, and asked him,

“Schwartz, I don’t get it! You don’t believe in God, but I see you going to services every day! Why do you do it?”

Mr. Schwartz answered him. “You know Mr. Goldberg?” the man nodded yes. “Well Goldberg goes to shul everyday to talk to God. I, I go to talk to Goldberg.”

Each of us has different reasons to be here. Some are looking for God, some are looking for intellectual stimulation, and some are looking for Goldberg.

But why we have come is less important than the fact that we are here ó together.

Because when we join together to pray, to study, or to engage in acts of community, I believe, that we are inviting God’s presence into our lives, whether we realize it or not.

Shana tova!