

Voice, Water, Place

So here we are, entering a new Jewish year, a time that in our tradition is seen as one both of hope and of trepidation. Hope, because we are celebrating the creation of the world as if today were that day - everything lies new before us. Hope, because we are given an opportunity to turn the page, to write a new chapter in our personal "book of life." And trepidation, because our ancestors imagined that at this moment, the fate of all of creation hangs in the balance, being reviewed and judged by the Ultimate Source of Truth and Justice. This is a moment of trembling, of wondering - do we deserve, as a species, to be given one more year?

I imagine that many of us might be feeling like the scales have been sliding emphatically to the side of "no." We are blowing it on so many levels, it's hard to know where to start. It is simply devastating to think about the impact of global warming, as our brothers and sisters in Houston and Florida, in Puerto Rico and across the Caribbean - deal with the impact of hurricanes and super storms. I have been speechless as I read about the miscarriage of justice in St Louis in the death of Anthony Lamar Smith, and the spectacle of police threatening to tear gas protesters seeking refuge in a colleague's synagogue, police marching through the streets like a white militia. It is incomprehensible that once again the Senate is attempting to take health care away from millions of Americans. And the list goes on.

I have been thinking a lot about what it means to retain our humanity in times like these. How to remain resilient in order to effectively organize for peace and justice. How to not give in to despair. For those of us who are white enough or rich enough, how to not simply turn away, attend to our own family, our own happiness, shrug our shoulders and pray that someone else will deal with the big problems.

In a moment like this, the High Holydays are a gift to us. They remind us that hope is not naive; that active hope is in fact essential. These Yamaim Noraim, Days of Awe, inspire, trepidation, demand that we look at the world and say - no. This is not what human beings were created for. And on Rosh Hashanah in particular, we are given the gift of this reminder: we don't have to do this alone. We have one another, we have community, and even more, we have That which undergirds all of Reality - the Ultimate, the Source of Life, God.

This latter gift is, I know, problematic for many of us. I run across folks all the time who are comfortable with a language of spirituality, but don't know if they "believe in God." I know many Jews who have no qualms about their Jewish identity but are clear that they are not "religious." This Big Thing called "God" too often becomes an obstacle to Jewish life, rather than meaningful part of it. But I know that I, at least, can't do this work on my own. I am too limited. And I know from my own experience that there are deep wellsprings of power that we can draw upon, but we have to know how. We need language to get there. And we need the right kind of language. Whatever that word "God" might mean, it clearly has been - and continues to be - used in all the wrong ways.

What I'd like to do tonight is to continue a conversation that I began with this community five years ago, when I gave a talk about the role of metaphor in our religious understanding. That talk launched a wonderful journey that we've continued in a number of classes that I've taught, in which I and some of you have explored what it might mean to bring the insights of cognitive linguistics - and the richness of our Jewish tradition - to bear on how we think about, talk about, and experience what some call "God."

I am working on a book on this topic, and tonight I'd like to bring some of what I've learned to you. My hope is that this will be helpful, whether you are adamant in your atheism or completely comfortable with traditional God language, or somewhere in between.

Many years ago, while I was in college, I worked at Christina's ice cream parlor in Inman Square. I was one of the ice cream makers, and we had an incredible array of flavors available each week, somewhere between 20 to 25. We had Negative Chip (white chocolate chips in chocolate ice cream), we had three variations on coffee, we had liqueur flavors, we had three or four Oreo flavors, we had ginger and avocado and kiwi and more. One day, when I was working in the front at the counter, a man came in with his young son, who was not old enough to read. The little boy asked, "What kind of ice cream do they have?" His father glanced up at the board, and said, "They have vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry."

Now, I assume this man knew his son well, and knew that either so many choices would be overwhelming or just wouldn't be appreciated by the little boy's five year-old palate. But in that moment, I was so sad for that little boy. Just because he couldn't read, he had no idea of the wondrous world of ice cream that lay right before him!

When it comes to thinking about and having access to one of the most fundamental and powerful of all human experiences, I feel like we modern American Jews are in much the same situation as that little boy. Our tradition is a veritable Christina's - there are so many flavors to choose from, so many ways that Torah, the Hebrew Bible, our rabbinic and mystical traditions - give us language and paths to access the ultimate mystery and meaning of life. Yet most folks I meet think that they have at best one or two choices. There is the "God is a remote King" flavor - the divine as a puppet-master who controls everything, good and bad. There's the "God is an inscrutable parent" flavor - rewarding us or punishing us like children. Or the very popular flavor that claims that God is Nothing at all, a figment of our imagination: that the whole idea is childish, dangerous, or just plain wrong.

Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, confronted this problem almost 100 years ago. He came to realize that we often confuse our ideas about God with the underlying human experiences of what we call the sacred, the divine. Kaplan argued that there is a realm of human experience that is universal, things that people in all places have experienced throughout human history. Kaplan's claim is bolstered by recent anthropology, the study of human interaction with the realm of the divine over the past tens of thousands of years. Since our earliest humanoid days, we have had experiences that are difficult to put into words. Experiences of Something both beyond ourselves and deep within ourselves.

These experiences give us a sense of meaning in our lives and allow us to imagine a world much better than the one we inhabit. The wonder we feel when we contemplate the cosmos; the deep sense of compassion and connection to others that we can access; a felt sense of being connected to Something that cannot be reduced to me and my limitations - these are all elements of what we can call the realm of the sacred.

There is no human culture which has not produced a rich language of myth and ritual and ethical instructions grounded in these experiences. These experiences are of Something real; they are not a delusion. But to give a name to them, to understand and access It, we both need and are limited by our language.

Ancient Asian cultures speak of “the Way” - the Dao - which guides and informs human action. Hinduism and its offshoots worship a myriad of divinities that represent the diversity of human sacred experience. A few thousand years ago, our Jewish ancestors evolved the notion of one Ultimate being that governs all of existence, a Being that cannot be represented by any image and whose name, spelled with the letters - Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay - cannot even be pronounced.

On the surface, all of these names, these ideas - the Dao, Adonai, the avatars of Brahma - seem completely distinct from one another. But ultimately, they are all just different cultural expressions of a universal human experience.

What Kaplan articulated many decades ago can now be understood in a new way, based on the work of cognitive linguists like George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. What Lakoff and Johnson and others have shown is that much of our human experience can only be thought about, talked about, understood, by means of metaphor. When it comes to complex human experiences of things like time, or love, or having ideas - we can only conceptualize them through metaphors that are based in our physical lives.

For example: we all function within this conceptual metaphor: TIME IS MONEY, or TIME IS A LIMITED RESOURCE. We *spend* time, we *lose* time, we *budget* our time. And we don't just talk about time this way, we experience it this way. We really feel like we “wasted” that afternoon in the doctor's waiting room, or that we “saved” time by driving a different route. But of course time is not actually money, or a scarce resource; this is just a metaphor that has shaped our lives since the industrial revolution, when our economic lives began to be organized by a clock.

I am bringing this example to show that metaphors aren't just literary flourishes: they are fundamental to how we experience many aspects of our lives. And metaphors change as our times and culture changes. New metaphors get introduced into our lives, and then those new metaphors shape how we experience our reality in new ways.

Which brings me back to God. What Kaplan understood is that the metaphors we use to access the realm of the sacred, the realm of our souls, these metaphors develop and change depending on our cultural context and what is going on in the world around us. Kaplan also argued that, if our God concepts don't keep evolving, they will become problematic or

even meaningless. Today, we in the West are functioning - whether we agree with it or not - with one predominant metaphor: God is a Big Powerful Person. Whether we say we believe in God or not, the God we are talking about is a Big Powerful Person. This metaphor has become what Lakoff and Johnson call a “metaphor we live by” - a metaphor that is so accepted, so invisible, that we don’t even realize it’s a metaphor.

The victory of this metaphor attaining such central status in our minds is sad to me, because - like the little boy in the ice cream shop - we’ve lost access to an incredible menu of metaphors for experiencing divinity. No one single metaphor can do justice to any complex realm of human experience - we need a lot of metaphors to adequately describe time or love - or God.

Our High Holidays liturgy is one place that we can find a variety of God metaphors. “Avinu Malkeinu” we sing - “Our Father, Our King.” The Unetaneh Tokef prayer imagines God as a judge on a throne, and as a shepherd tending His flock. On Yom Kippur we sing “Ki Anu Amecha” - “We Are Your People” - which includes a smorgasbord of metaphors describing our relationship to the divine. Many of the images in our liturgy are meant to evoke a sense of a Power that shapes us, that cares for us, and that holds us accountable. We are clay to the potter, the vineyard to the caretaker, the subject of a merciful ruler.

I don’t think there is anything inherently “wrong” with any of these metaphors. Sometimes they can be quite powerful. But there are two ways the liturgy can come up short. The first is when we encounter these images not as metaphors but as definitions - when we assume that the poets who wrote these prayers were trying to tell us, “this is what God is.” For various reasons we might not agree with that definition, and then the whole enterprise loses its power to move us. The other problem is that most - not all, but most - of the images we encounter in the liturgy function within the God is a Big Powerful Person metaphor. And like any metaphor, that one has its limits.

The good news is, we have much more available to us in our tradition - intriguing metaphors for the divine that do not evoke any image of a BIG PERSON, that aren’t in the human realm at all. These metaphors can open up for us different ways of accessing the realm of the sacred, the realm of the spirit. Our Biblical and rabbinic ancestors were quite brilliant, actually. They realized that it’s not that Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay doesn’t have a name - it’s that It has many many names, each one providing a different gateway into the realm of the sacred, into the language of the spirit and the wonder of the cosmos. So, without further ado:

Metaphor #1: WATER.

The year that he turned 40, my father suffered his first heart attack. I remember coming home from school (I was in 11th grade at the time) and being told by my mother what had happened. It was a total shock--my father was young, strong, seemingly healthy. My dad spent over a month in the hospital, and when he came home, he was different than the person who went in. He no longer smoked, and after years of working long hours and subsisting largely on coffee and cigarettes, he pulled way back on his work hours and

watched his diet carefully. And he also, in the wake of the heart attack, took up two activities that I would now call spiritual practices. Interestingly, both involved water.

Beginning a few months after he got home from the hospital, Dad would drive out to the Calvert Cliffs in Maryland, where he would walk along the beach and collect sharks' teeth and other fossils. He would spend hours there, methodically searching the sand at the base of the cliffs. And around the same time, he took up kayaking. He loved being out on the Potomac River, whether paddling through flat water or floating down the rapids. And like many recent converts, my dad was a fervent proselytizer. Every new friend or acquaintance had to join him on the river. A few years before his death from a second heart attack at the age of 64, my father became president of the American Canoe Association, where he could spread his gospel of salvation through floating on rivers.

I thought about my dad when I discovered that one of the most common metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible is water. In the book of Psalms, the authors speak again and again of drawing sustenance from divine waters:

In Psalm 36: How precious is Your love, O God!...You give us drink from the stream of your delight...

And in Psalm 42: As the deer longing by the streams of water, so does my soul long for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God...

In the haftarah for Yom Kippur, from the book of Isaiah, we read:

YHVH shall guide you always, and satisfy your soul in drought...and you shall be like a watered garden.

In thinking about God-as-Water, I have realized how different the verbs in these verses describing Godly action are, in contrast to God as Big Powerful Person. Water does not command or judge--it flows and irrigates, nourishes and sustains. God-as-Water invites us to identify when and how we become spiritually "dry," and how we might irrigate our parched souls. I invite you, in the coming days and weeks, to pay attention to the ways in which your spirit might be feeling dry. What might it mean to seek life-giving Water - to even admit that you're thirsty for something to nourish you from deep within, like a sprout awaiting water in the earth?

And unlike God-as-Distant King, God-as-Water is not "out there," far from us, but right here, within us. In the first chapter of Genesis, we are told that human beings are created *b'tzelem Elohim*, "in God's image." According to the U.S. Geological Survey, about 60% of the human body is made up of water (our brains are 70% water, and our lungs 90%). What new meaning the phrase "made in God's image" takes on if we think of God-as-Water, and ourselves as made up largely of that Godly substance! We are literally composed of sacred stuff. Water is precious and powerful and essential, as are we.

But water is not just the source of life and nourishment - as we know from recent events, it can also overwhelm, in powerful and even deadly ways. It was this paradoxical nature of water, as both life-giving and life-threatening, that ended up being very helpful to me as I navigated my spouse Gina's illness and death. As she endured difficult months of chemotherapy, I needed every ounce of strength and compassion I could find to be a support to Gina, and to keep myself from being overwhelmed by sadness and despair. During this journey, I found myself drawn to a chant composed by my friend and teacher, Rabbi Shefa Gold, a setting of a verse from the book of Isaiah:

Ki ta'avor bamayim itcha ani - u'va'neharot lo yishtafucha

When you pass through the waters, I am with you; I won't let the rivers overwhelm you (Isaiah 43:2).

Chanting these words, I realized the profound insight of this verse. Water is another name for God, and God is another name for the Reality that I was facing. Water is essential to life--indeed, water is life--and yet sometimes it is also That which threatens me, overwhelms me, drowns me. God is at one and the same time the Waters through which I pass, and That which supports me as I make my way through.

Understanding this, I didn't rail against the unfairness of an inscrutable God who had brought suffering into my life. Instead, in the slow-motion heartbreak of that difficult year, I did my best to sit with the reality that ultimately faces each and every one of us. I remembered my father's instruction to lean *into*, not away from, the turbulence when navigating a kayak through the rapids. I understood that the waves can be overwhelming and terrifying, and yet within them is the Godly Presence which sustains and supports me, even in the most challenging moments. I gave myself over to overwhelming waters, allowing myself to feel the profound sorrow within them, even as I sought the reassurance of God's Presence accompanying me as I made my way down the river.

So in these coming days, as you sit in services or take time to yourself, or even when you find yourself in your car or on the T or at work or in a classroom, I invite you to bring this image of "God as Water" to mind. If you are feeling exhausted and beat down by the world around you, know that nourishment is available to you, a living Flow of sweet Water from which you can drink. If you need strength to face challenges, know that you can draw upon *maayanei ha-yeshua*, a Godly Well of Liberation that lies deep within. In moments of self-doubt, you can remember that you are made of Godly stuff. And in those moments of pain and overwhelm, when you are not even sure you can put one foot front of the other, lean into the current, and know that somewhere in the waves that threaten to overwhelm you is the very strength you seek.

Metaphor #2: *MAKOM*

One of the most common and yet oddest Jewish names for God that I have come across is "HaMakom" - which literally means "The Place." I have no idea how exactly it came to be, but by the time of the Mishnah - around the year 200 - Makom - Place - had become a very

common rabbinic name for the divine. The way it is used makes it clear that HaMakom always implies a sense of God's nearness. In using this term, the early rabbis were saying that we can encounter Godliness, a sense of wonder and awe, in any Makom, in any place.

In addition to suggesting a sense of Godly presence, HaMakom also implies comfort and compassion. We still use today a 2,000 year-old rabbinic phrase when we extend a blessing of comfort to a mourner. We say, "May HaMakom comfort you among all the mourners of Zion." In the Talmud, the Hebrew name "HaMakom" is used interchangeably with an Aramaic name for God, Rachamana, which means "Compassionate One."

God as Place is a fitting metaphor for those times when we seek comfort. When we are vulnerable, sad or frightened, we can imagine ourselves in a familiar place, a place where we feel sheltered and protected. HaMakom is God as Refuge, as the Place to which we retreat to ground and gather ourselves.

There is a beautiful moment in the book of Exodus when Moses is pleading with YHVH for a clear sign that God is with him: "Show me Your *Kavod*--Your Glory!" Moses begs. This request comes at the moment when Moses is trying to repair the terrible breach in the relationship between God and the Israelite people, a breach caused when the people build a golden calf and begin to worship it. In the aftermath of that crisis, Moses is seeking compassion and forgiveness for himself and his community.

In response, God says to him, "*Hinei, makom iti*--Here, [there is] a place with Me". God invites Moses into a very intimate Place, a Makom where Godliness dwells. There, Moses learns that he won't be able to have a direct, visual experience of YHVH. When the revelation finally arrives, there are no pyrotechnics, no burning bushes or trembling mountains. Instead, Moses hears a new name for God. In this Makom, in this place, Moses learns God's true, essential name: *Adonai, Adonai, El Rachum v'Chanun, Erech Apayim v'Rav Chesed v'Emet*...Compassion and Mercy, Patience and Lovingkindness, Truth and Endless Forgiveness.

Sometimes I like to read Torah stories the way a therapist once told me to interpret dreams: to assume all of the characters are me. In the story of the Golden calf and its aftermath, the Israelites are that part of me that screws up, that goes astray, the part I get angry at and frustrated with. Moses is my better nature, the part of me that realizes that continually berating myself isn't particularly productive. And YHVH is the Source of compassion which I can draw on, my own capacity for compassion to which I always have access. The "*makom*" into which the Moses part of me is invited is this "place" of compassion. I like to think of this "place" as my own heart.

What I have learned over the years is that, with practice, it is possible to increase my capacity for compassion and loving response. In the metaphor of *makom*, it is possible to expand this space within myself, the place of compassion for myself and others.

Over these holidays, we will encounter again and again in the liturgy a plea for compassion. We invoke the Godly power of mercy and forgiveness over and over again. Using the

metaphor of Makom, we can imagine ourselves entering a Place where we experience refuge, safety and love. We can connect to the place of compassion within our own hearts, and practice receiving compassion and sending it to others from this place - because the Source of compassion is always available to us, in all places. *Hinei, Makom Iti.*

And finally, metaphor #3: *KOL/VOICE*

In the Torah and elsewhere in the Bible, divinity is often represented as voice, sound, speech. At the very beginning of creation, words are spoken, and a world comes to be. At the burning bush, a voice calls to Moses from within the flames. At Mount Sinai, the Israelites hear thunder, and shofar blasts, and God and Moses speaking to each other. Many centuries later, the prophet Elijah retraces Moses' steps to that same mountain, and waits for an experience of God. A great wind sweeps by; then an earthquake; then fire - and God is in none of these. And then - *kol d'mama daka* - a small, thin sound; a voice of soft silence. The voice that is God.

What does it mean to experience the Divine as "voice"? The 20th century Hasidic rabbi, Shalom Noah Barzovsky, tells a wonderful story about Reb Moshe Leib of Sasov. Reb Moshe Leib was walking down the road one day, when something fell from a wagon passing by. The wagon driver stopped, and asked if Reb Moshe would pick it up. Reb Moshe Leib responded that he wasn't able to. The wagon driver replied "You are able, you just don't want to." And in that moment, Reb Moshe Leib heard the word of God directed to him: "you are able, you just don't want to."

Rabbi Barzovsky uses this story to illustrate a verse from the book of Exodus, where God says to the Israelites, before they receive Torah: "If you will listen, really listen to my voice - *im shamo'a tishme'u b'koli.*" He teaches, "We are invited to listen always for the voice of God speaking directly to us. Whatever transpires during the course of our lives, whatever we see or hear, is all the voice of God speaking to us...This is one of the first conditions that must be present if we are to fully inhabit our lives, particularly in our inner experience. We must always be listening to hear God's voice speaking to us."

Or to put it another way: Rabbi Barzovsky is inviting us to be a bit like Reb Moshe Leib, able to hear something powerful and even holy in the somewhat rude comment of a wagon driver. There is so much we hear, all the time - so much noise coming at us from all directions. If we really pay attention, can we hear a different Voice - the Godly voice that is speaking to each of us? What might the world be trying to tell us?

It is not a coincidence that at the center of Jewish prayer practice, repeated in the morning and evening services and at bedtime, are these words from the Torah: *Shema, Yisrael.* LISTEN, Israel - listen, each of us.

In Hasidic tradition, the voice that went out from Sinai never stopped. There is Torah - insight, wisdom, learning - to be received every day, every moment, by each of us. We just need to learn how to listen. To experience God as Voice is to be open and aware, to be ready to receive the instruction that is meant just for me. It's an interesting practice, to

walk through the world listening for that voice from Sinai. And Reb Moshe Leib teaches us to be ready to hear the voice in unexpected places - maybe even from people we haven't been trained to respect.

So I invite you to try it. Take a day and pretend that every interaction you have that day is a manifestation of the divine Voice. What do you hear? What is the learning in there for you? What is your "call," this year - what are you being called to do? Sometimes I think it's possible to revel in the ungodly noise, in the distractions, because we don't really want to hear what the world is asking of us. So perhaps make some time for quiet - either here during services, or taking a walk in the woods or just sitting quietly at home. Let your mind and heart open to the possibility that the Universe has a message for you, and it already lives somewhere within you - you just need to make space to hear it.

So: Water. Place. Voice. Some names for God that you can play with in the days to come. Opportunities to experience the Ultimate, the Source of Life, in many forms, many guises. You might say, "well, this is all well and good, but I still don't believe in God." And that's fine. This isn't about changing what any of us believe, but expanding what we might be able to experience. May each of us, in this new year, be nourished by the Fount of Living Waters, find refuge in the Place of compassion, and hear the Voice that carries a message meant just for us.

L'shanah tovah tikateivu!

*Rabbi Toba Spitzer
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5778*