

God & Metaphor
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Some of you have heard me say, at past High Holydays services, that I recognize the tension that many people who come to our services experience. In certain ways it's like being at a play featuring a main character that you may not like very much—or even worse, you question his very existence. That “character”, of course, is God.

There are of course people for whom this “character” poses no problems at all, and that's fine. There are also folks who have no trouble writing Him out of the script altogether. But for most of us in this room, I would guess that that is not an entirely satisfying option. God has been at the center of the Jewish narrative for a very long time, and all of this—our liturgy, our sacred texts—assume the existence of the Divine. So what's a good Reconstructionist to do? Do we have a choice between killing off the character entirely, or remaining stuck with a script that is less than convincing?

To attempt a response to that question, I'd like to take a step back.

This summer I read a very interesting book called "*I Is An Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How It Shapes the Way We See the World*," by the writer James Geary. In this book, Geary explores the work of cognitive linguists who, in recent decades, have put forward some very new and powerful ways of looking at how human beings understand and relate to the world.

When most of us hear the word "metaphor," we think about a literary device where one thing is described by juxtaposing it with something else: for example, "laughter is the mind sneezing."

But there is an important school of thought that understands “metaphor” in a much more fundamental and profound way. In this understanding, metaphor is inextricably linked to how human beings think and talk about—everything.

In the words of one such linguist:

"External reality does exist, but we have access to it only in our particularly human ways. We see categories in the world only as a result of our uniquely human experiences. The world, for us, is a 'projected' reality that human beings 'imaginatively' create." The processes by which we "create" the world include "categorization based on prototypes, organizing knowledge in terms of frames, and understanding experience through metaphors." (Kovecses, *Language, Mind and Culture*)

This doesn't mean that there is not a reality out there, only that our access to that reality, both to understand it and to talk about it, is through the ways in which we organize our understanding. And metaphor, in a broad sense of the term, is fundamental to that process.

One important component of our understanding is what the linguist George Lakoff calls "frames." A frame is a culturally-based model that helps us organize and understand our experience. For example, one frame in Western culture is the COMMERCIAL EVENT. This "frame" entails words like buy, sell, pay, spend, cost, and charge. Because all of us in this room are familiar with this frame, if I say something like, "The car cost me \$10,000," you'll know what I mean.

Where it gets interesting is when we bring two frames, or "domains," into relationship. Then we get what Lakoff and others call a "conceptual metaphor." This kind of metaphor - which is much much more than just a literary device - occurs when we use language from one area of life, one "domain," to understand and talk about another, usually more abstract - domain.

One example of a conceptual metaphor is "AN ARGUMENT IS A BUILDING." We say things like "You should buttress your argument with more facts," or "You have to support your argument with solid information" - these statements all arise from within the conceptual metaphor, AN ARGUMENT IS A BUILDING. Another conceptual metaphor is "IDEAS ARE FOOD." Here we might say something like "this plan is half-baked," or "Let me chew it over for awhile."

As James Geary writes, "Without conceptual metaphors like these...we would have no way of talking about--or even thinking about--abstractions like love, beauty, suffering, and joy." These conceptual metaphors operate at a fairly unconscious level, although they can be seen once we start looking for them. And once you start looking, you see them everywhere. My personal favorite is ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER - so we tell someone to "simmer down," or say that she is "seething with anger."

This area of cognitive linguistics has some interesting things to say about how science - and scientists - work. In a book called *Making Truth: Metaphor in Science*, the author--himself a scientist - states:

"In this way of looking at things, truth is the product of human reasoning. It follows that science does not proceed by discovering preexisting truths about the world. Rather, it consists in observing the world and formulating truths about it." (Brown, p. 51)

What struck me about that statement is that you could say exactly the same thing about religion, or our foundational religious texts, like the Torah: they do not proceed by discovering preexisting truths about the world, but they observe the world and formulate truths about it.

Both science and religion assume, correctly, that there are some greater realities out there, whether the physics of the cosmos or the place of the human being within that cosmos.

Both science and religion, in different ways, use conceptual metaphors as ways of exploring the universe and making sense of it. Metaphors help scientists conceptualize new theories and avenues for exploration. New scientific models - like Einstein's relativity theory - come along and overturn earlier models - like Newtonian physics - that until that moment were thought to be accurate descriptions of reality.

Thomas Kuhn has famously written about the role of metaphor in "establishing a link between scientific language and the world," helping us express things in realms like quantum mechanics that we can't directly observe and can only describe by way of analogy and metaphor. Kuhn also noted that when scientific theories change, there is a "change in some of the relevant metaphors" (quoted in Geary). If we take a metaphor too literally, if we forget that it is in fact a metaphor, we will be unable to change our theories about how things work. **If we forget that the original intention of the metaphor was to help us see the world in a new way, we'll be incapable of being open to new ways of understanding.**

The danger, in both the scientific realm and the world of religion, comes with what Geary calls the "extinct metaphor" - that is, the metaphor that everyone has forgotten is, in fact, a metaphor. With the "extinct metaphor," we forget that we are actually speaking in metaphoric terms, and we mistake a metaphor for an objective fact. Geary gives the example of the phrase, "I see what you mean." We don't really, of course, "see" anything, but this extinct metaphor no longer feels metaphoric in any way.

In talking about the use of analogy in scientific language, Geary makes the point that:

"Analogies are always flawed because one thing is never *exactly like* some other thing...The danger of an analogy...is not that it may be incorrect but that people forget it is an analogy."

And this brings me back to our problematic character, God. What I'd like to suggest is that the problem we have is that the ways we've been trained to think about God, the conceptual metaphor that shapes our understanding, has become extinct. Meaning, we've forgotten it's a metaphor.

Those who wrestle mightily with our religious tradition are usually operating within a conceptual metaphor where GOD IS A BIG POWERFUL PERSON.

We have forgotten that ancient texts that describe God as a "King" or a heavenly parent were originally written as metaphors, were used by our ancestors to describe something that can only be described using metaphoric language. Yet instead of saying, "Hmmm, that metaphor isn't powerful or descriptive anymore," we say "God is a big powerful person? I don't buy that, so therefore, God doesn't exist."

Both believers and non-believers have forgotten that our holy texts are chock full of metaphors and analogies, all created in order to provide a way of looking at and being in the world. And there are two results that can come from taking religious metaphor literally: we either become fundamentalists, trying to literally apply teachings and imagery

from thousands of years ago to a radically different world today, or we reject the entire enterprise, deeming it unreal and unbelievable.

What I'd like to suggest to you today is that there is a third way, somewhere between religious fundamentalism and complete atheism. And that way is to re-embrace metaphor and begin a project of radically re-conceptualizing what we've known as "God."

I begin with the assumption that ancient peoples, including our own ancestors, were not idiots. Like us, they lived in a world that could be uncertain and scary at times, and at other times beautiful and inspiring. They knew both danger and love, and they saw that people could do great damage and also great good. They tried to make sense of their experience, to understand why people do the things they do. They tried to understand their own suffering, and the challenges they faced, whether caused by the natural world or other people. The myths and stories they wrote reflected their struggles to understand and articulate what they knew about the world and themselves.

Ancient peoples experienced themselves as moving about in a world where there existed greater forces than themselves, and they gave names and images to those forces—what we call “gods.” The ancient Hebrews, the creators of the Torah, did something interesting. Their idea of the divine was a kind of amalgam of the many godly powers of Mesopotamia and the land of Canaan. Instead of many gods, there eventually arose the belief in one ultimate Power that incorporated the qualities and powers of the gods and goddesses that had come before.

Quite brilliantly, in my humble opinion, the authors of the Torah came up with a name for this ultimate Power that can't really be spoken, and is beyond definition. It has four letters - Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay. Rabbi Arthur Green says about this name:

It is to be read as an impossible construction of the verb “to be” ...*Y-H-W-H is a verb that has been artificially arrested in motion and made to function as a noun...*Try to say anything definitional about Y-H-W-H and it dashes off and becomes a verb again. This elusiveness is underscored by the fact that all the letters that make up this name served in ancient Hebrew interchangeably as consonants and as vowels. Really they are mere vowels, mere breath. (*Seek My Face, Speak My Name*)

With a name like this, it seems as if the early Israelites were trying to keep things as open as possible when it came to conceptualizing the divine. When Moses, encountering God for the first time at the burning bush, asks, "What shall I call you?" The answer he gets is "Ehyeh." "I will be." What kind of a name is that? It's not exactly a name at all. Maybe we can imagine it with three dots following it: "I will be..." - many things to many people. I will be...understood and experienced in lots of different ways. I will be...that very power of possibility that this name implies. "Ehyeh."

The Torah goes on to tell its readers to not try to limit this Power, this Ehyeh, to any one image. Don't make statues or images of things in nature and think that they can somehow define the Ultimate, the invigorating Power that lies behind and within this world of ours.

So the challenge becomes, how do we represent Divinity in words, in stories, in prayers? Our ancestors' answer was: with lots and lots of different images - with metaphors, that is.

There are tens upon tens, maybe hundreds, of metaphors for YHVH in the Torah and the rest of the bible. There are of course anthropomorphic images - texts that describe YHVH having human emotions like anger, that talk about God's "arm" or use analogies like "God is a man of war" or a "shepherd with his flock."

But the very first Biblical metaphor, in the second verse of the Torah, is "*Ruach*," which means "breath" or wind. Elsewhere we read about a disembodied Voice, the *kol Adonai*, a voice without a body that is heard at the bush, at Sinai, by the prophet Elijah in a cave.

Sometimes Ehyeh is represented by fire, and sometimes by a cloud. In the Psalms, we find water metaphors. The Psalmist writes, "I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Ps. 63:1). Elsewhere we read "wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (Ps 51:2). The prophet Jeremiah calls God "the fountain of living water" (Jer 2:13). In one place the Ultimate is described as an eagle, sheltering the Israelites beneath her wings; elsewhere we read about God's *kavod*, a kind of earthly presence that manifests as light.

Now let me say it again. These are metaphors. When they were written, they were lively and thought-provoking and far from extinct. The authors of the Torah knew that God was not an eagle, or fire, or a well of water, or a big person. They may have experienced God in ways that we no longer do. God's presence was very close for them, and sometimes a regular old person they were having a conversation with would turn out to be a messenger of YHVH - maybe even a manifestation of Godself. But what they were trying to do - in the form of narrative in some places, in poetry elsewhere - was to articulate their own relationship to the Divinity they sensed around themselves, as individuals and as a community. They wanted to understand their place in the world and in relation to That which they sensed was the Source of it all.

From reading the Torah, I imagine that our ancestors experienced this world as precarious, uncertain, and dangerous. And so the God they wrote about was sometimes threatening and unpredictable - because that is Reality. And yet they also had the experience that this same God cared about them, was the source of compassion and of justice. A messy, complicated God for a messy, complicated world.

That way of talking about God shifted in later centuries. Through the influence of Greek ideas that made their way in to both Jewish and Christian philosophy, we got the notion that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, unchanging and perfect. This sadly was not a God of many metaphors, but a philosophical abstraction that has caused a lot of trouble. Because it's hard to reconcile the complex, metaphorical Ehyeh of the Torah with the notion that God is everywhere and knows everything, and is perfect.

The task for those of us today who want and need a spiritual language is to build on the metaphors and images that we've inherited, while also creating new ones that speak to our own experience and understanding. The past century has given us radically new ways of understanding our physical reality, from quantum mechanics to astrophysics to the insights of neuroscience. And although we live in a world that is explained in many ways by different fields of science, there are still questions that science cannot answer.

I believe we need metaphoric ways of understanding our relationships within community, our connections to the earth and its creatures, our obligations as citizens, as family members, as human beings. We need conceptual metaphors that will help us wrestle with fundamental questions of meaning, with our own mortality and the frailty and preciousness of life.

Judaism gives us metaphors which still speak powerfully across the millenia: the idea of covenantal community; the notion of "rest," Shabbat, as a fundamental spiritual practice; the idea that every person is created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in a divine image. None of these are "facts" or literal truths; they are frames within which we can understand who we are and what we need to do.

The project of creating new metaphors for God or Godliness is not a new one; Jews have been doing it for many centuries. To the Biblical lexicon the early rabbis added metaphors like 'Makom' - God as the "Place" of the universe; "Shekhina" - the close, feminine aspect of Godliness; and many others. The mystical tradition created an entire system of metaphoric descriptions of the divine, from the ultimate Ein Sof, the Infinite, to a complex system of *sefirot* - clusters of symbols that include everything from apple orchards to the moon and sun to qualities like generosity and obedience.

In the middle of the 20th century, Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, challenged us to radically re-think how we conceptualize God for the modern era. He gave a very interesting example from the realm of the physical sciences to suggest how this might be done. Kaplan asked:

Why not conceive God as process rather than as some kind of identifiable entity? ... Take, for example, the case of fire. Primitive man personified it. Later it came to be regarded as one of the four elements of the universe. Still more recently, it was considered as due to the presence of a distinct substance called "phlogiston." Today it is conceived as the process of oxidation. Surely, it is no less real by reason of its being recognized as a process. So, too, our conception of God. God has been thought of as a kind of magnified human being, or as an ethereal substance. Instead, we suggest that God be thought of as the cosmic process that makes for [humanity]'s life abundant. (*Future of the American Jew*)

Kaplan here is suggesting that we replace the conceptual metaphor GOD IS AN ENTITY with a new one, GOD IS A PROCESS. We need to uproot a limiting and problematic conceptual metaphor that has stunted our thinking, and replace it with other metaphors that will open us up again. We need to step outside of outmoded assumptions of God's omnipotence and

omniscience, some cosmic combination of tyrant and Santa Claus, and talk instead about how we experience this world, and what we experience as Ultimate within it.

Kaplan goes on to say that belief in God entails “the faith that reality, the cosmos...is so constituted that it both urges us on and helps us to achieve our salvation, provided, of course, we learn to know and understand enough about that reality to be able to conform to its demands.”

We must “learn to know and understand enough about reality to be able to conform to its demands.”

That is the religious project, the spiritual project, the Jewish project. It is time for our language, and the metaphors that undergird our thinking, to catch up and help us with this project. And we’re not starting from scratch. There are fundamental Jewish teachings that need to be incorporated into any theology that we might create:

#1: Human beings are precious and unique, but are not the Ultimate. As the midrash reminds us – we may be the crown of creation, but we always need to remember that the mosquito was created before us (and will probably be around long after us). On the scale of the cosmos, we are very very small, and there are forces that have enormous power over our lives, for better and for worse. We don’t ask to be born, and we don’t have much say about how long we’re going to be on this earth. How do we come into relationship with the organizing Process of the universe, with That which gives us life and shapes who we are?

#2: Human beings have free choice. Within the parameters of the life we’re given, there are better and worse ways for us to act. We can understand our lives as an ongoing process of discernment, seeking in any given moment to respond to what is asked of us in the most wholesome way possible. The universe is on our side in this task, if we learn to connect ourselves to the Wellspring of life and of compassion.

#3: There are attitudes, or mind-states, which it is helpful to foster - mind-states like gratitude, wonder, humility.

And #4, last but far from least: We are called to have a sense of service to Something greater than ourselves; we are challenged to organize our various drives and intentions for the good—of those around us, of our community, of all of humanity and the planet.

We can respond to and build on all those teachings without ever using the word “God,” and that’s fine. If you don’t like that word, find another that helps you frame your place in this universe and your obligations to it. I personally like YHVH—perhaps we can vocalize it “Ehyeh”—because of its openness, its possibility. Some form of God language gives me a way of being in relationship with the cosmos, with That which animates me and obligates me. I find it useful to have a “You” sometimes—to pray to, argue with, to praise.

Another possibility is to move beyond nouns altogether. The wonderful thing about Hebrew is that words that are used to describe Divine action—like “*rofeh cholim*,” “*matir*

asurim,” “*zokef kefufim*”—are gerunds. They are usually translated as nouns—“Healer of the sick, the One who frees the captive, Who raises up the oppressed”—but it could easily be translated instead in this way: “Healing the sick,” “Freeing the imprisoned,” “Lifting up the oppressed.” What would happen in our brains, in our perceptions, if we used present-tense verbs to describe the Power or Process that animates us, challenges us, beckons us towards our best selves?

I didn’t find, in my reading about cognitive linguistics, any instructions for how to uproot problematic conceptual metaphors. But I did learn that re-framing is powerful, and it has implications for how we think and how we act. James Geary writes, “The best metaphors are sticky. Once attached to a particular idea, they start to work as an organizing principle through which everything pertaining to the idea is seen.”

So may our new metaphors be sticky, and may our new year be sweet!

Books referenced in this talk include:

Theodore L. Brown, *Making Truth: Metaphor in Science* (Univ. of Illinois Press 2003)

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