

Changing the Equation: A Reflection on God *Yom Kippur 5770-Rabbi Toba Spitzer*

A few years ago, I was attending a retreat for rabbis sponsored by the Institute for Jewish Spirituality. As an introductory exercise, we were sitting in a circle facing a partner, sharing answers to a variety of questions. The leader asked us: “If money were no concern, and if you had all the requisite skills and knowledge that you would need, what would you be, other than a rabbi?” As I waited to answer, I was pretty sure what I would say. I’ve often felt that I’m a failed community organizer. While I had always imagined my life work being in the activist world, at some point I realized that I just didn’t have the personality type to go knock on doors of people I didn’t know. But if I could be a different sort of person, that was the work I would want to do! Community organizer. So imagine my surprise when, as I opened my mouth to answer this question, out came the words, “I’d be a physicist.”

You would find this response particularly amusing if you knew anything about my high school career. I took exactly one year of high school science—biology—and never even got as far as pre-calculus in math. I don’t think I’ve ever been in the vicinity of a physics textbook. I muddled my way through the few science classes, designed for non-scientists like me, that I was required to take at college. It is clear that in this lifetime, at least, physics would never have entered my mind as a career path. So why did I say it?

As I thought about it, I realized that there are indeed aspects of being a rabbi that are shared with those people who spend their time trying to figure out how the universe works, from the most micro to the most cosmic level. My colleague, Rabbi Bob Tabak, has made the marvelous observation that the Torah is not like an email or a telegram from God. It is more like a telescope that our ancestors fashioned to search for signs of divinity in the universe. And I very much resonate with that image. I feel that I peer through the lens of Torah—and through the lens of other sources of accumulated Jewish wisdom, as well as through spiritual practices both Jewish and non-Jewish—to gain some glimpse of how this universe functions, and what my role in it is.

As a rabbi, I feel that it’s my job to support and accompany—and sometimes prod—others in that search as well. And I realize that to undertake that search in a Jewish idiom, it can often feel like the bar is set very high. Just as the math involved in advanced physics limits its practice to a select few, I know that for many people it can feel like there’s just too much that gets in the way in Judaism—the Hebrew, the archaic texts, the baggage we bring with us from the past. And, perhaps the biggest stumbling block of all—that great character we call “God.”

The truth is, it’s hard to search for something that you don’t really believe is there. If notions of God are just human neuroses projected onto the universe, as Freud suggested, or the remnants of a pre-scientific mindset, as others argue, then why should we waste our time looking for something that we already know doesn’t exist? Why not dispense with the God-talk altogether, and focus on just living our lives the best way that we know how?

Those are fair questions. It's certainly possible to live a good and productive and meaningful life without thinking too much about God. But in my experience, the whole God thing makes it confusing for a lot of people to relate to their Judaism. It makes it hard to relate to the liturgy, and it's hard to avoid the liturgy when we're celebrating a Jewish holiday or marking Shabbat. It probably leads a good number of you to wonder what it is, exactly, that you're doing here. My sense is that people's ambivalence about and struggles with the whole realm of what we call "God" is seriously getting in the way of feeling comfortable in their Judaism, and of being able to take on spiritual practices that could be profoundly meaningful, even transformative. And even those of us who are fairly comfortable with a spiritual language that includes God often have a difficult time articulating what it is that we mean by that word, and may find ourselves stuck when life events don't entirely comport with the ideas about God that we do carry with us.

To return to our telescope metaphor, what I'd like to suggest to you this morning is that the search is indeed worth it, but if it's to be satisfactory and meaningful, we need to reconceptualize what it is that we're looking for. It is time, perhaps, to finally usher out an image of God that gets in the way, and to find something else to put in its place. So I'd like to invite you to join me on this journey for the next 15 minutes or so, to see if we might be able to begin a conversation that can open up our minds and hearts, and provide a lens accurate enough to help us in our task. If you have an image of God that works for you, that fits your own experience, then that's wonderful. No need to dispense with it. But it might be interesting to try on another conception, to add to your store of images of the divine, and to deepen your own thinking about what God might be.

Let me begin by telling you about the God that I do not believe in:

A God that is all-powerful and in total control over the events of this world.

A God that is perfect and unchanging.

A God that stands somehow outside of the universe which He She or It created.

A God that is a Thing, even if a very awesome and big Thing.

Now, I wish I could follow that list with a similar list that would tell you exactly what I believe God is. It would make this talk refreshingly short. But I can't do that, because Reality is very big and very complex and far beyond my ability to comprehend in its entirety. Just as physicists have not yet discovered a grand theory that can unify quantum mechanics with the theory of general relativity, so I will not stand here and pretend to have a grand coherent theory of everything Godly. But there are some very powerful ideas out there that help me understand how what I call God functions in the universe, and I would like to share some of them with you.

All ideas about God begin with people's notions of what reality is and how it works. In the West, classical theology has been profoundly influenced by the Greek philosopher Plato and those who came in his wake, and by an Enlightenment scientific worldview that continues to shape traditional religious thinking. Plato believed that that which is most real, that which is ultimate, is abstract, perfect and unchanging. In this schema, somewhere out there is a perfected

form called “Toba” which is the real me, while the “me” right here is a somewhat shoddy, clearly imperfect, embodied version of that perfect form. According to this worldview, everything in existence has its corresponding perfect form, and the ultimate perfect form is God. And perfection, in this understanding, is that which never needs to change.

Here is a quote from Plato’s *Republic*:

Things that are at their best are also least liable to be altered or decomposed...Then everything that is good, whether made by art or nature or both, is least liable to suffer change from without...But surely God and the things of God are perfect in every way?...Then it is impossible that God should ever be willing to change; being, as is supposed, the fairest and best that is conceivable, every God remains absolutely and forever in his own form. (quoted in C. Robert Mesle, *Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead*, pp. 67-68).

By the early medieval period, this particular notion of perfection and the idea of God as the most perfect, unchanging Reality had been imported into both Christian and Jewish theology. While the Platonic notion of ideal “forms” has fallen by the philosophical wayside in the intervening centuries, the conception of God as perfect and unchanging has proven far more resilient.

Accompanying the idea that God is perfect and unchanging is the idea that God is omnipotent—all-powerful and totally in control. Our understanding of what “all-powerful” means is also very much influenced by Plato and those who followed in his philosophical wake. In this understanding, ultimate power is the ability to affect others—to cause change—while not being affected—that is, being impervious to change. This notion of all-powerful has been called “unilateral power” and “coercive power”—the idea that true power is power over others. As philosopher Robert Mesle points out, this definition of power is widely shared in our culture. The people or institutions that we tend to think of as “powerful” are those that can exert their will on others while remaining in control of their own destiny, and thus not be at the mercy of the power of others. And so God, if God is thought of as all-powerful, is the ultimate Unilateral, Coercive Power—that which exerts Its will on others without having others’ will imposed upon It.

There are a number of problems with the classical conception of God. The most difficult is what is called the question of theodicy. If God is all-powerful and presumably a force for good—otherwise, why would we worship it?—then it becomes exceedingly difficult to explain why evil exists in the world. Does God make bad things happen, or just allow them to happen? And why would an all-powerful good God do either? Why would a perfect, unchanging God create a world that appears to function in the exact opposite way—a world that is messy and ever-evolving, a world that is far from perfect? Either the world doesn’t exactly work that way—which is the stance of the Creationists, who defy the reality of the evolutionary process, and say the world is just as God planned it—or God becomes a power so divorced from this world as to be essentially unknowable and unapproachable. All in all, this conception of God leaves an enormous amount to be desired. We either end up denying basic facts about the world, or we have a capricious God who plays games with human lives, or a mysterious God about which we can ultimately say very little.

The classical notion of God as unchanging and all-powerful has become so entrenched in our thinking that most people fail to notice that this God bears very little resemblance to the Biblical God, most especially the God of the Torah. In the book of Genesis, God creates a world which is good, puts some people in it, and almost immediately those people start doing things they're not supposed to do. Within a generation, we have one brother murdering another. After a few more generations of humanity sliding into ever-greater levels of violence and mayhem, God completely regrets having created them, and decides to start all over again, wiping out the initial creation with a great Flood. All that, and we're just 6 chapters in to the book! Clearly, whoever wrote these texts had no conception of an eternally unchanging God. The Torah's God is a God that regrets, that changes course, that fiddles around trying to get things right—a God who learns. In a later midrashic tradition, it's said that God made over 900 worlds before finally settling on this one. Surely, a perfect and unchanging God would have gotten it right the first time?

Similarly, the Torah's notion of God's power is quite different than the classical portrayal. It is true that the Biblical authors tried to demonstrate that the God of the Israelites was more powerful than other people's gods, whether Pharaoh in Egypt or the pagan gods of the Canaanites. But the God called Adonai and Elohim does not exert total coercive control over the world. Going back to the Creation story, God commands Adam and Eve to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—a command which they promptly disobey. A major theme of the rest of the Bible is human failure to comply with the laws and instructions given to them by God. Human free will is very real for the Biblical authors, with the implicit assumption that God's power cannot violate that freedom.

In addition, the God of the Torah is profoundly affected by the people with whom It interacts. The Torah portrays a God in constant dialogue and mutual relationship with human beings—including the ability to undergo a change of heart. In the book of Genesis, we see Abraham arguing with God not to destroy the innocent along with the guilty in the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and God acquiesces to Abraham's arguments. Multiple times in the book of Exodus, an exasperated God is ready to wipe out the kvetchy and recalcitrant Israelites, only to have Moses intervene and convince God to forgive them.

The Torah is an ancient document, and the human metaphors it uses to describe God are certainly problematic. But if we can see beyond those metaphors, there is a deeper truth that these Torah stories convey: that it is in God's nature, just as it is in human nature—indeed, in all of nature—to change, evolve, and grow. It is also in the nature of things that true power is not unidirectional or absolute, but relational. All life is interdependent, and the ability to adapt to changes in the surrounding environment—that is, to allow oneself to be affected by others—is the key to the survival and development of all living beings. As Robert Mesle writes:

“It seems clear that it is precisely the power to *affected* that increases as we move up the chain of complexity from mere electrons, to molecules, to microorganisms, to plants and animals, to vertebrates with brains and central nervous system, and finally (so far as we know yet) to human beings. It is not our power to remain unaffected, or even the power to control others, that makes our lives richer and more valuable. It is our amazing capacity

to be affected by the incredible richness and complexity of the relational web in which we live.” (*Process-Relational Philosophy*, p. 72).

Mesle goes on to define this “relational power” as having three components: the ability to be actively open to and affected by the world around us; the ability to create ourselves out of what we have taken in; and the ability to influence those around us by having first been affected by them.

What if we were to uphold this kind of power, relational power, as ultimate, rather than the unilateral, coercive power of traditional philosophy and theology? Why would we exalt a kind of power that is not only unrealistic, but perhaps immoral? A power that cannot be affected by others, that can impose its will with impunity, that never ever admits to being wrong, is essentially tyrannical. Why would we call that kind of power Godly? And what have been the real consequences of humans striving to arrogate that kind of power to themselves, striving to make themselves into little gods of this sort?

If we want to conceive of a Godly power in the universe, then it makes little sense to think of it in ways that fundamentally contradict the realities upon which life is founded. If God is the source of Creation, as Judaism claims, then God must share in those characteristics that make Creation the powerful, beautiful, and complex process that it is. This would be a God that exerts relational power, not unilateral or coercive power. It would be a God that is interdependent with all of life, that both affects and is affected by other beings within its universe. This would be a God that—in the metaphoric language of the Torah—asks the first human to name the animals, and waits to see what he does; a God that cannot free an oppressed people by itself, that needs Moses and the midwives and other Israelites to take on the burden of liberation. It would be a God that, in rabbinic metaphor, suffers alongside the Jewish people when they are exiled from their land, a God that cries out when a human life is lost.

The problem of God is often stated as a conflict between science and religion. On one side are those who believe that our growing scientific understanding has made belief in God not only irrational but irrelevant. On the other side are those who reject the findings of science because they find it incompatible with their understanding of God. But this is not an intrinsic or inherent conflict. I would suggest that the problem is more that conceptions of God have gotten stuck in the philosophic and scientific understandings of a past era, and it’s time to bring them into line with how we now understand the universe around us to function.

A few hundred years ago, the assumption of Western science was that the universe was made up of little bits of stuff—atoms and molecules—that were essentially things, substances, little billiard balls that joined together to make up the material world. The revolution of 20th century physics was to understand that we and everything around us is made up of particles that can take the form of energy or waves. A static notion of reality has given way to a dynamic understanding of a universe in constant motion. In the realm of biology, we have the theory of evolution, a process of ongoing change and of ever-increasing complexity of which we are a part. In physics, we have subatomic particles that, according to the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle, can respond in unexpected ways to the conditions imposed on them, so that their behavior cannot be

predicted. Evolution, change, unpredictability—these fundamental characteristics of reality must now be incorporated into our understanding of the divine.

The gift of our tradition is that we in fact have such an image of God, located at the heart of our master narrative, the Exodus story. Having fled his home in Egypt and taken up a new life as a shepherd in the land of Midian, we're told that Moses first encounters God while pasturing his sheep in the desert. He comes across a bush that appears to be burning, without being consumed. Moses soon realizes that he is in the presence of the divine, and he receives a message—that he must return to Egypt in order to free the Israelites from slavery. Moses asks, "Who shall I say has sent me? What is your name?" "*Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*" comes the response—"I will be that I will be." As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "God's name belongs to the future tense. His call is to that which is not yet." *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*: this biblical name of God incorporates an open-ended sense of becoming, a process of unfolding, that is the polar opposite of the static, unchanging God of the philosophers.

This is where I—following the lead of a school of thought called Process Theology—locate the power of Godliness. Process theology understands all of reality as a constantly emergent process. In each moment there is an element of novelty, of something new emerging, yet it is shaped by the past, by what has gone before, by the world as it is. That which emerges is shaped by what has gone before but is not determined by it. Chance and contingency are real, and the result is the world of complexity in which we live—a world that is both beautiful and difficult, awesome and dangerous. It is a world in which ever-increasing levels of complexity have led to us, human beings, to a level of consciousness that makes possible both great good and great evil.

In process theology, that which is called God—but perhaps we will call it *Ehyeh* instead—plays a dual role. It is on the one hand the repository of possibility, the source of novelty. In the language of our liturgy, God is that which *m'chadesh b'chol yom tamid ma'aseh Bereshit*—the Power that makes new every day the work of Creation. This ancient rabbinic claim corresponds to the idea, first formulated by the great 20th century mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, that there needs to be an actual source of novelty, something with which the world-as-it-is interacts, to create new possibilities. The ongoing "becoming" that every living thing experiences every moment of every day must come from somewhere. Whitehead eventually overcame his own atheism to posit God as that source of novelty.

This process of becoming, the power of novelty, is only one aspect of the process God. God is also understood to be the source of what has been called "persuasive power." This persuasive Power imbues every aspect of Creation with its own ultimate end, an orientation, a possible fulfillment. In contrast to the unilateral, coercive power attributed to God in classical Western theology, this Godly persuasive power cannot determine where any living being—whether a molecule or a groundhog—will end up. The course of events, of interactions with other aspects of Creation, will help determine that. But every actual being is given an orientation, if you will, towards which it points. And this persuasive power is felt most fully, and wrestled with most mightily, by us.

As beings with a high level of consciousness, with what we call freewill, we are given real choices, for good and for evil. We have the capacity for enormous compassion and creativity, as

well as for enormous destructiveness. If there is a leap of faith in process theology, it is that ultimately the good within Creation outweighs the bad, and that we are intended to express that good. The fact that we have the capacity to care for others, to undertake moral actions that do not serve our narrow self-interests, to act with generosity and love, implies the existence of an impulse in the Universe that urges us in that direction. This persuasive Power does not punish us, like an angry parent, if we defy that direction. But reality is so constituted that we, and those around us, will suffer the consequences if we ignore its demands.

At the burning bush, Moses comes to a new understanding of the universe and his place in it. In receiving his “call” from God, he also takes on an obligation that will shape the rest of his life. The Power of *Ehyeh* that Moshe experiences is the persuasive Power that calls to him to come into his fullness as a human being—as one who can help free a people, and lead them to a new place. In the language of Judaism, each of us is called in this way. We are drawn into covenantal relationship with this Ultimate Power with the promise that we, too, can come into our fullness as human beings—as individuals, and as a society—if only we will listen—*Shema!*—to what it is that the Universe demands of us.

When I peer through the lens of my own experience, through the lens of Torah and science and process theology, at both the world within me—my own heart, soul, and mind—and the world outside, with all its beauty and its suffering, its order and its randomness, I encounter the creative power of *Ehyeh* that suffuses the natural world. The challenge to me, to all of us human beings, is to learn to live in harmony with that power, to find our place in this evolving, ever-changing world of things in such a way that we do not destroy it.

I also encounter the persuasive Power of *Ehyeh* that nudges, encourages, leads me to better attune myself to what it is that the Universe needs from me. I hear a demand that my spiritual and ethical practice be in service not only to my own fulfillment, but to enable me to address the injustices and inequalities that keep others from coming into their fullest potential.

I experience *Ehyeh* as the Source of Transformation, of the novelty and uncertainty that makes every moment a doorway into something new, something never seen before. With this understanding of Godliness, I try to bless my own uncertainties, to embrace the ways in which I am always in process. And I am reminded to be humble in my search for truth, to remember that, as Alfred North Whitehead once wrote, “The universe is vast. Nothing is more curious than the self-satisfied dogmatism with which [humankind] at each period of its history cherishes the delusion of the finality of its existing modes of knowledge.” I hear a demand to bring a healthy skepticism to bear when listening to anyone who attempts to reduce the complexity of reality to a single truth, whether expressed in genetic code or in a simplistic reading of a holy text.

And finally, I experience *Ehyeh* as a profoundly deep well of joy and of love that is expressed in the relational power that suffuses the universe. The anthropologist Barbara King, in her study of the development of the human religious consciousness, writes of “moving through the world with a spirituality that is part of everything that is and everything that one does. Religion is of the body, the mind, the imagination, of relating and loving and caring all at once.” (*Evolving God*, p. 189). I don’t mind calling God “You” sometimes, as I engage with the liturgy, to capture this sense of connection and relation. And I don’t mind using my imagination to seek that

connection through metaphors that I know not to be literally true, metaphors of parent and teacher, Creator and liberator.

Every eye is a bit different, and so every lens needs to be adjusted to fit when a new eye looks through it. I hope that some of what I have offered you this morning is helpful to you, as you continue your own search for what is holy and powerful in the universe, for that which you feel will support you and nurture you, as well as challenge you and obligate you. And may you receive the rest of this day as a gift, for your own reflection and inquiry. May we all be sealed in the book of life, blessing, and wholeness, *sefer chayim, bracha, v'shalom*.

For those who would like to do more reading about the Process approach to philosophy and theology, I would recommend these two books, both intended for the lay reader (and remember, if you want to buy them through Amazon, please go to the Amazon site from our website!):

Process-Relational Philosophy: An Introduction to Alfred North Whitehead

by C. Robert Mesle

Templeton Foundation Press, Pennsylvania, 2008

Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition

by John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin

Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, 1976