

Rabbi Daniel G. Zemel
Temple Micah
Washington, DC
December 2, 2017

Dear Ben,

This morning we continue a long standing Temple Micah tradition wherein the rabbi's sermon remarks are a response to a question posed by the bar\bat mitzvah student. You, Ben, have asked me both a deeply personal question as well as an extremely difficult question. It is a question about which I have no objectivity as to the quality of my answer. You asked me--if this morning I could explain the nature of my belief in God.

I will begin by saying that I both count myself as a person of faith and I don't like the question, "Do you believe in God?" or the statement "I believe in God."

Both the question and the statement seem to me to be inadequate to the subject.

In the context of the question I find myself wondering what it means to believe and what the person is thinking when they ask about God.

In terms of the word "believe," Ben--it is now deep enough or resonant enough. I prefer to use the word in different contexts----as in --Do I **believe** that that my beloved Chicago White Sox have a chance to win the World Series next year?

For me--God language and faith require a different vocabulary than phrasing the question in this way.

And--as to the God end of the question--

I do not think of God as an invisible, super hero. I do not think of God as a person--a super person. I do not think of God as more powerful than Superman, smarter than the smartest IBM computer and sitting at some kind of massive control station manipulating all that is.

I don't think that God is somewhere listening to these words or listening to my prayers or the prayers of anyone else for that matter.

The closest I can say about God is what God is not-- this is also the approach of RMBM--that great Jewish philosopher of the 12th century who believed that

human language was inadequate to the task of saying anything about God except for what God is not. I am very drawn to that way of thinking.

I do want to try and go a bit farther than that this morning.

In Eric Kandel's great book, *In Search of Memory*, he describes his studies as a Harvard trained psychiatrist. Now remember, Kandel is a Nobel Prize winning scientist in physiology. His contribution to science is for combining the fields of mind studies--psychology--with brain studies--neurology. He is the father of modern neuroscience.

In one section of the book, Kandel is describing a lecture he attended as a young Psychiatry Fellow at Harvard. The lecturer is a scientist with a model of the brain. After the lecture, Kandel approaches the scientist, points to the model of the brain and asks where in the brain, the ego and id are located. The scientist looks at him with a certain incredulity and says that it is an impossible question--that ego and id are metaphors used to describe human behavior. They relate to the mind--not the brain.

It is at that point Ben, that Kandel begins to change the direction of his own career and decides that he wants to study much more deeply the chemistry and biology of the brain. His career thus combines mind study with brain study.

The story however drives home for me an important point. It centers on what I will call "Modernity," and the way Modernity has shaped the very way we think.

The pre-modern world had a preference for what I will call external metaphors. Modernity has given us a preference for internal metaphors.

What do I mean?

The pre-Modern mind believed in evil spirits, angels, demons, sprites, fairies and the like. There were leprechauns out there--for example.

These all were out there in the world somewhere-usually invisible to us--sometimes they might appear. There were witch doctors and shamans who knew how to conjure them and influence them. They were very real. They were out there--all around.

The Modern world believes in egos, libidos, ids and super-egos. These are all inside of us. They cause us to behave the way we do. They are invisible. You

cannot dissect a brain and see them. You cannot point to where they are on a model of the brain but for us--they are very real.

Modernity has moved the metaphors inside the self.

God remains--as a kind of external metaphor--if you will. Now metaphors are very real. There is no human communication with out them. The very idea of language is itself a metaphor--a human attempt to communicate about reality.

Modernity makes God talk even more complicated for us than it was for Maimonides, eight hundred years ago.

So--let me move on--

Ben--in attempting to understand my own Jewish religious belief, I have taken to studying modern philosophy to try and get a grip on what I am about. Here I turn, for example to Thomas Nagel, of New York University:

Existence is something tremendous, and day-to-day life, however indispensable, seems an insufficient response to it, a failure of consciousness. Outrageous as it sounds, the religious temperament regards a merely human life as insufficient, as a partial blindness to or rejection of the terms of our existence. It asks for something more encompassing **without knowing what it might be**....How can one bring into one's individual life a full recognition of one's relation to the universe as a whole?" (Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament*)

I want to review this text slowly-(and I truly wish that you and everyone else here had a copy.)

Day to Day life is insufficient to recognizing the awe of being alive--the realization that there is something--and that each one of us--each individual self--is somehow part of something huge and powerful and dramatic.

Our normal everyday lives don't satisfactorily express --give voice to--a certain depth of our awareness.

This is what Nagel is saying.

This feeling gives birth to what he calls the religious temperament--an attempt to acknowledge that awareness--the sheer awe of being alive--and being aware that

we are alive. This is something that Rabbi Akiba even hinted at two thousand years ago when he comments on the awesome nature of our being aware that we are created in God's image. Akiba is using insider language for what Nagel is driving at.

Nagel's next sentence for me is a jaw dropper when he writes--

The religious temperament "asks for something more encompassing **without knowing what it might be...**" Without knowing what it might be!!!!

Once we accept this-this not knowing, we can consider the words of Marilyn Robinson-- among our country's very greatest writers and thinkers--

She writes:

"Two questions I can't really answer about fiction are (1) where it comes from, and (2) why we need it. But that we do create it and also crave it is beyond dispute... For years I have been interested in ancient literature and religion. If they are not one and the same, certainly neither is imaginable without the other. Indeed, literature and religion seem to have come into being together... narrative whose purpose is to put human life, causality, and meaning in relation, to make each of them in some degree intelligible in terms of the other two." (*When I Was A Child, I Read Books*-- Marilynne Robinson pp 7-11)

This opens the door to religious ritual, prayer, poetry, music, symbols, what religious people designate as holy places. These are all expressions for me of attempting to make real or to give voice to the "**without knowing what it might be...**"

We have a yearning to express, to hold, to touch. We have a need to try understand who and what we are and what our place is in the universe.

In Jewish life-- we come together on a day we call Shabbat to try and express the "what it might be..."

Ben, this helps us understand what we are now calling the religious temperament—something that I feel very deeply.

But we come back to God.

The French thinker Jean-Luc Marion puts it like this:

God cannot be seen, not only because nothing finite can bear his glory without perishing, but above all because a God that could be conceptually comprehended would no longer bear the title 'God'... God remains *God* only on condition that [our] ignorance be established and admitted definitively. Every thing in the world gains by being known—but God who is not of the world, gains by *not* being known conceptually. The idolatry of the concept is the same as that of the gaze, imagining oneself to have attained God and to be capable of maintaining him under our gaze, like a thing of the world. And the Revelation of God consists first of all of cleaning the slate of this illusion and its blasphemy.”

God remains -by definition--unknowable. I am content with this. Anything else is idolatry.

In Jewish life however we have something more. The Jewish God has a commanding moral dimension. I believe this with all my heart. In fact, I believe, that in Jewish life--putting anything before morality is idolatry.

My oft quoted teacher, Rabbi Larry Hoffman, put it like this:

" A religious person believes that life is not without meaning. It is not devoid of transcendent purpose. Ethics cannot be relative, as if to say, I am right for me, you are right for you, and Hitler was right for Hitler. Enslavement, torture, and mass murder are immoral, absolutely. It cannot be true that life demands nothing from us, leaving us free to search out pleasure at whatever costs to others...." (p13- Re-Thinking Synagogues)

The God I search for in my life Ben, is what another great teacher, Rabbi Eugene Borowitz, perhaps the greatest theologian of Reform Judaism in America, called the ground of all ethics. God is the guarantor that the search for meaning has meaning and the guarantor that doing the good matters.

Our moral compass requires, demands, calls out for an eternal mooring. What William James called, "a sense of fundamentality that there is something in

the universe that throws the last stone..." (William James, Talk to the Philosophical societies of Brown and Harvard)

Two final thoughts--bit from my undergraduate teacher and adviser--who also taught your mother- Professor Jacob Neusner-- arguably the greatest Jewish scholar to ever live in North America.

"A religious world without words to tell us in proposition and syllogism what is at hand lives only for the moment of its epiphany. But a religious world composed only of words to tell us misleads and deludes, as does a kiss through a veil, a poem in translation, a report about pain, a narrative of someone else's death." (*The Enchantments of Judaism*, Jacob Neusner)

In other words-- religion and thus faith is about experience that must then be interpreted. This is how God comes to us. This alone makes your question, Ben, a bit unanswerable. The experience is key. Telling someone about God is like "a kiss through a veil." All the rest is then commentary--trying to make sense of the experience--give it context, breadth, a place, a mooring.

and

also from Neusner--written just two years ago and just one year before his death just over a year ago--

"I am nearing the end of a scholarly career spanning more than six decades, but nothing in my scholarship--not the history of the Jews of Babylonia or the sages of Yavneh--speak meaningfully to the context of the United States....We have no historical analogy to draw on. And as a scholar of theology and history, I have no way to connect the challenges of the present to the trials of the past." (Jacob Neusner, *Commentary Magazine* November, 2015)

In other words-- in terms of our Jewish faith lives--we are living in uncharted territory.

The challenge to embrace God is real.

This, Ben, I can only hope, begins to capture the sense of the God and the God challenge for all of us with which I grapple.

I have said a great deal here--perhaps too much. Too many quotes? Too many big thinkers? Too much text. I fear all of this Ben--all in an attempt to answer a more than challenging question.

Ben--Keep asking questions-and be open to hearing all sorts of answers. Read, think--pursue knowledge and wisdom-and perhaps most of all be patient as you sort it all out.

Rabbi Ben Bag Bag taught us to consider and to reconsider--over and over again. This is the path to the deeply considered and I think--well lived life.

Mazel Tov on your great day-- My prayer is that you some day find for yourself a path to God that works for you.

As I invite you now to the bimah with your parents for a special blessing.