

## **Theological Reflections on 9/11: One Year Later**

### **“Rabbi, Where was God that Day?”**

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## I

In late July, several of Summit's Christian ministers and I were invited by a 60 minutes television producer to discuss the theological implications of 9/11 for videotape.

All of us who participated -- Monsignor Harahan, Reverend Dreyman, Reverend Kannwischer, and I -- agreed to do so in the prayerful hope that our reflections would bring some intellectual clarity, perhaps some peace of mind, to all those who have struggled with their faith since 9/11. As you might imagine, at first we were all a bit nervous under the glare of the television lights. However, we became so engaged in our symposium-style dialogue that we soon forgot all about the cameras. When the filming came to an end, all of us felt deeply moved by the experience. I am informed that a brief excerpt from this videotape will be aired on 60 minutes tomorrow night and it will be shown in greater length at another time.

As you may recall, in response to 9/11 Reverend Jerry Falwell invoked the classic biblical doctrine of divine retribution. He declared that 9/11 occurred because God was angry at how secular America has become.

I was pleased that all four of us clergy -- Roman Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish -- rejected Falwell's depiction of a punishing God. We expressed our complete agreement that 9/11 was absolutely not God's will! This is not the way God acts in the world. Indeed, all liberal Jewish and Christian theology teaches that God is not the cause of our suffering. When we cry, God is crying too.

But if God does not cause our suffering, what does? Human evil and random chance. The glory of

Creation is that God has made us free. We are not puppets on a divine string. We have been created

*Betzelem elohim*, in the image of God, and we are free to choose whether or not to live up to the billing. We can choose to embrace the *yetzer tov*, our good side, or the *yetzer ra*, our dark side. Human freedom comes with a cost. The price of our human free will is human evil.

### III

After 9/11, some of us are having trouble holding onto our faith. Some of us feel disillusioned and angry that God did not come through with some sort of miracle. Over the past year, I have been asked many times: "rabbi, where was God that day?"

I believe God was there. God was manifest in the unbelievable heroism of the firefighters, police officers, and emergency rescue personnel. God was present in the unimaginable courage of those employees in the twin towers who refused to abandon their disabled co-workers. God was found in the incredible outpouring of love and compassion, of hugs and kisses that we showered upon the grieving and still do.

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What I am suggesting to you is a different way of conceptualizing God and God's providence. It is the concept of an immanent God who exists within the universe rather than outside it or above it. This God "is to the universe as the yeast is to the loaf." [Gittelsohn]. This God exists within each flower, each blade of grass. This God exists within you!

This God of which I speak is non-supernatural. God acts upon the world from within nature. God acts upon the world through every manifestation of godliness within us, in every human effort to live up to the highest ethical principles.

### IV

But what about all that transcendent stuff we were taught about God as kids in religious

school? What about that supernatural, magical God who comes down from the clouds in the sky to intervene in human affairs and do miracles? Why didn't that God appear on 9/11?

That God didn't appear on 9/11, or during the holocaust, or at so many other tragedies we can name, because that's not the way God really works. In a post-holocaust world, and now a post-9/11 world, there is more than enough evidence available to invalidate the concept of a transcendent God.

But where did we get these expectations of transcendence in the first place? They come from too much literal-mindedness in our reading of the bible. We have interpreted the stories of God's miracles in the bible so literally that we have come to expect God's presence is something we ought to be able to perceive directly and immediately through sight, sound, and touch.

But the torah is not literal truth. It's spiritual truth. Symbolic truth. The images of the bible are only metaphors. God is imaged as a "he" but we know that God is not literally a male. So too, creation in six days, Adam and Eve, Noah and the ark, the splitting of the sea, the ten plagues, the earthquake at Mt. Sinai -- they are all descriptions of the ineffable in the form of metaphor. For centuries, we have been taught to take literally what should have been interpreted metaphorically all along.

The torah itself suggests a metaphoric approach. In exodus, chapters 33-34, Moses asks to see God's face, to directly experience God's presence. You know that God replies *lo tuchal lirot et panai ki lo yirani ha'adam vachai*. "You cannot see my face, for man may not see me and live." instead, God offers to make God's presence pass before Moses while he is protected in the cleft of a rock. Moses cannot see God's face but he can see God's back.

In other words, we human beings never get to experience God directly but only indirectly. We don't see God's face, but only God's back. Therefore, we must look for the traces of God within the world and within ourselves.

The pre-modern God concepts and God metaphors that we inherited from our ancestors -- king, father, judge, shepherd, he -- are inadequate to explain our experience. The way our ancestors thought God works in the world is not correspondent with the way God actually operates.

As liberal Jews, we have always stood for the

Principle that the bible must be taken seriously without being taken literally. Declaring ourselves atheists or agnostics quite misses the point: what we need to do is to formulate new God concepts and new God metaphors that ring true for our time and better cohere with our human experience. Can we imagine a Judaism grounded in different metaphors, in 21<sup>st</sup> century metaphors?

## V

In this new perspective that I propose to you

Today, which derives from both religious naturalism and Jewish mysticism, God is not a supernatural personal being who commands and controls the world, dispensing reward and punishment. Rather, God is the ever-renewing energy force that powers the universe and its ongoing creative evolution. God is the name we give to all the cosmic processes through which everything and everyone is connected. Don't think of God as a static noun. Think of God as an interactive verb!

In this way of thinking that is both mystical and naturalistic, God does not stand over against the universe. God is not separate from everything, not quite so distant from ourselves. God is embedded within everything and every one.

And God pervades the universe. God can be seen everywhere in the natural order of things: the miracle of birth; the cycles of nature; the immutable physical laws of the universe on which human life depends every day for its existence. So too, God can be perceived everywhere in the moral order of things. The miracle of moral conscience itself; our innate impulse to pursue "truth, beauty, and goodness"; the evolutionary thrust that causes evil people and evil societies ultimately to self-destruct.

In this new spiritual paradigm, God does not wish us to suffer in any way. But since God does not interfere with human free will or the physical laws of the universe, bad things can happen to good people through random chance and human evil.

A crucial question remains: how, then, does God help us? God is our spiritual oxygen. It is God who gives us our indomitable spirit, our capacity to behave with courage, decency, and grace.

Rabbi Roland Gittelsohn explains, "I can expect that God will continue to work within me as a reservoir of strength, enabling me to survive that which would otherwise break me. So many times I have been aware of drawing upon such support from outside myself: when a battle raged within me between my profound pacifist convictions and my obligation to volunteer as a military chaplain; when the very marrow of my bones shivered in fear in Iwo Jima during world war ii; when I watched helplessly as my first wife sank into a swamp of incurable illness. During those crises and others, I inhaled a surplus of strength from outside myself, as surely as I inhale oxygen from the earth's atmosphere. I depend upon God to act as my spiritual oxygen." God is the air we breath, physically and spiritually.

## VI

It is more than possible to rediscover our faith --even after 9/11. But the prerequisite may be our willingness to finally cut our apron strings from some of the fundamentalist and

literalist notions that we have held onto since childhood. As in every other area of knowledge, perhaps it's time for us to make a paradigm shift in our way of thinking about God and God's providence. In addition to Jewish mysticism and Mordechai Kaplan's religious naturalism, there are so many other new theological models for you to explore: Martin Buber's religious existentialism, Arthur Green's mystical humanism, Judith Plaskow's Jewish feminism, Eugene Borowitz's covenantal postmodernism. I could go on and on. This morning, you have heard from me a more sophisticated theological message. Isn't it time you began to study contemporary Jewish theology?

What I have commended to you today is a model of religious naturalism, a Judaism without supernaturalism and without anthropomorphism. It works for me because it is an approach to God that requires of me "no retreat from reason" [Gittelsohn].

It works for me because I am a scientific-minded person who nevertheless believes that the world is suffused with God. *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh. Adonai tzivaot. Melo khol ha'aretz kevodo.* "Holy, holy, holy is Adonai. The whole world is filled with God's glory."

The famed philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein was right when he said that the limits of our world are identical with the limits of our language. "the greatest need of our generation is a new language, a new vocabulary for ancient and eternal truths...new metaphors for God which will really function in our lives and the lives of our children"[Gittelsohn].

May each of us know the blessing of such an empowering faith, a usable faith that really helps us make sense out of the sorrowful and the sweet.

## VII

Some of us have searched for God all our lives and come up short. We looked up to the heavens; we clung to the images of our childhood; we interpreted the Torah literally. None of them worked. We never found God because we kept looking in the wrong places.

During these high holy days, let us search again! "Spiritual growth is a matter of uncovering new depths rather than attaining new heights" [Green].

"let us think of the journey to God as a journey inward rather than upward" [Green].

Let us look deeply within our souls and within the everyday wonders of nature. Then, perhaps, we shall discover that "the way to God is through the world, not around it" [green].

For God is:

"Wherever human beings struggle for freedom and right...

"Wherever the scientist toils to unbare the secrets of nature...

Wherever the poet strings pearls of beauty in lyric lines...[Tagore]

God is found "in the merry shouts of children at play"

God is found "in the mother's lullaby, as she rocks her baby in the crib"[Tagore].

Thank you and a blessed New Year to all!