

## Ask The Rabbi

### **A New Twist in Rabbi Weintraub's Teaching**

Beginning this month, and continuing occasionally in our monthly Kane Yirbu newsletter, Rabbi Weintraub will use his column to answer questions about Judaism posed by readers. Questions may be sent to [Rabbi@kanestreet.org](mailto:Rabbi@kanestreet.org) While the name of the questioner will not be given in Kane Yirbu, you must identify yourself in the submission to the Rabbi.

### **Dear Rabbi:**

A question on NPR last night made my husband and me think. The question was, "What percentage of atheists go to church?" The choices were 3%, 7% or 17%. I asked, "if you turned the question around, what percentage of people in church (or shul) are atheists, could you see 17% being the correct answer? My husband said he could.

This all got me thinking. My husband is a firm believer in G-d; I like to say that I believe in G-d every other Tuesday, because I just can't hold on to any sort of consistent, firm, non-amorphous belief in something beyond the fact that I think G-d is an idea.

I think that in any given congregation, you have those of us who you might characterize as "the hopeful doubters" who come to Shul for non-specific reasons and who find benefit from it. There are certainly believers who come for the purpose of worship. Do we "get" each other? Is there G-d language that would help the one understand the other?"

### **Dear Hopeful Doubter:**

Thank you for this theologically and socially sensitive question. In fact, I have heard often from believers, doubters, and atheists about their difficulties in talking to one another.

That's where we should start. It's not hard to see why conversation would be difficult. However, the problem is less the disagreement than a basic misconception about one's relationship with G-d. If our relationship with the Ultimate was determined by calm, intellectual deliberation, then discussions and arguments would be central in bridging differences.

However, one's relationship to G-d is significantly nonintellectual. It is rooted and sustained by personal experience, and in archetypes and constructs which are deeply imbedded in us as inheritors of ancient religious traditions. Dialogue must draw from the spiritual experiences, and even more from the spiritual yearnings, which we all have.

What do I mean by that?

All of us feel the presence of spiritual realities at various points. We may feel a basic discomfort with our lives, even if we are materially satisfied. We may feel the need to call out to someone with deep questions: Does my life really matter? Why can't I trust people anymore? Why is this innocent person suffering? We also need someone to whom we can express thanksgiving for the wonderful moments in our

lives, as when we see a beautiful natural vista, or witness the birth of a child, or reflect on the richness of the life of a loved one who has died.

Our thoughts at this moment may be inchoate, but they make us wonder: What is behind all of this? Is there something connecting all of the world together? From where did this person draw such incredible strength? Who gave the mountain range its majesty or the tropical forest its radiance?

Over time, as we have these experiences, as individuals and as collectives, we seek to give this spiritual presence a name. Historically, Jews have addressed Yahweh, Adonai, Elohim, Avinu Malkeinu, Gotttenu, and now in English G-d. We need the names because when we are completely bereft, or totally awestruck, or at the height of sexual ecstasy, you can't call out to an abstraction.

The need for this personal address also creates problems. No sooner have we called out, or dragged ourselves to Shul and opened the prayer book, then all sorts of questions come up. "You mean that Old Man in the sky, the punishing and rewarding G-d! Yich!" "Is this that patriarchal Figure that separates Jews and nonJews, orders stoning for Sabbath violators, and sits aside while children suffer! Forget it!" "You mean that Hebrew School G-d, splitting seas and giving donkeys speech. Come on!"

Despite all of these questions, the curiosity and wonder persists: "Still, I can't understand how a person facing such odds could go on!" "I sat there with my children and grandchildren and knew that something much bigger was responsible for all of this." "I don't know how it happened. The risk was enormous but I knew deep inside that I had to do it."

Blind belief or total atheism are tempting, because we imagine that they will resolve our inner tension. They will not, for most of us, because we know that these options can shut out both the challenges and miracles of our complicated world.

The solution for you and your community is to find a way to live with the contradictions, to search for meaning despite all of the objections and traumas that the world throws at us. That way you can develop a deep, personal relationship with G-d without denying your own experience, or the teachings of your people who struggled with these contradictions since Abraham, in Genesis 15, goes out in the middle of the night and shouts at Heaven about his family problems.

If you can think less about G-d as an idea, and feel more the millions of cries and prayers, from joy and from sorrow, which Jews have offered to "G-d" for 3000 years, the matter will become less abstract and less contentious. This is not to say that intellectual reflection, that is, theology, is not valuable, but it is a very late and partial step in religious growth, which begins and is sustained through non-rational awareness.

Finally, a story from Reb Nachman of Bratzlav, the Chasidic master, which provides solace to me when this search becomes overwhelming. Reb Nachman commented on a verse in the Ne'ilah prayers which conclude the Yom Kippur liturgy. One prayer begins, Av Y'da'a'cha Mino'ar" which means there, "Abraham knew You from youth." Generally, this is taken to mean that Abraham discovered the monotheistic belief in One G-d when he was young. Reb Nachman, however, interprets it as "Abraham knew You from Your youth". In other words, Abraham

was telling G-d, "We knew You from the time that You were young, when both of us were just starting this covenant, this sacred enterprise together".

Isn't that beautiful? Not only we, and not only our believing, doubting, or denying friends, but G-d Himself, is growing, struggling, having tsurus, wondering if all of our work is adding up. Out of this messy and circuitous, but also passionate and holy mission, G-d and Jews, no matter what they call each other, build a relationship and improve the world.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Weintraub