

I AM NOT VERY RELIGIOUS

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The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah – Overland Park, Kansas

Sermon by Rabbi Arthur P. Nemitoff

A young woman walked into my study and declared: "Rabbi, I am planning to convert to Christianity and join the church up the street. But before I do, I wanted to talk with you so you can help my parents when they inevitably come to you and ask you to talk some sense into me."

With that introduction, she proceeded to tell me how she had – for the first time in her life – discovered what it meant to live a life of faith, to feel that God was a part of her existence, that God was her constant companion, that God was both inspiration and guide as she navigated through the (at times) stormy seas of life.

What she said next, though, was the most disturbing: "And you know, Rabbi, though I don't blame you or anyone in particular, I found none of that in Judaism. I went to Pre-School, Religious School, Hebrew School, became a Bat Mitzvah, was confirmed...I even went to Israel. But no one – no one – ever talked about God and how God could be a part of my life. If someone had...well...maybe I would still want to be Jewish."

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A century or two ago, it would have been unthinkable for such a conversation to take place. As sure as we were that night followed day, so too were our identities as Jews established upon the rock of God's relationship with us. We did what we did because God demanded it. All we were – all we ever hoped to become – was placed into God's loving hands. Through our very intimate covenantal relationship with the Holy One, we understood our place in the universe. And we were never alone.

That is how many of our Christian neighbors express their belief in God today. We've all heard it. When I asked a minister friend the other day for a favor, his response was, "I'll need to pray about that. If I hear God calling me to help, you can absolutely count on me." There is a beauty in the simplicity of such faith. And honestly, when there is a connection between faith and action, the lives that result are filled with sparks of *tikkun* and *kedusha*, healing and holiness.

Somehow, what our ancestors knew and what many of our Christian neighbors have embraced, we have forgotten. The language and the living of faith is foreign to many of us. Even the belief in God is rarely – if ever – discussed. According to one survey of almost 8,000 individuals conducted in 2006, while 72% of Protestants and 65% of Catholics know that God exists, only 27% of Jews affirm this idea.¹ The same survey demonstrated that 43% of Jews never or almost never feel God's presence. Compare that to 6% for Protestants and 10% for Catholics.² "For whatever the reason, we have refused to think about God, treating the subject like something afflicted with leprosy; something to be avoided at all costs."³

A rabbi was once asked by a local television station to stage a mini-Simchat Torah celebration a few days before the actual holiday, so that it might be aired as part of the news program on the night of the holiday. Over 300 people, children and adults, joined for the 15 minute taping. On the night of Simchat Torah, the rabbi faced a congregation of only 30. Later, when asked why she didn't come to the real Simchat Torah celebration, one Board member

demurred, “Oh, you know, I really am not very religious. But I did watch us on the news. Doesn’t that count?” It seems that the 35 seconds of fame were more inspirational than the celebration of 3500 years of tradition.

Or consider the conversation I had many years ago when visiting refuseniks in what was then the Soviet Union. I will never forget the comment a young Jewish woman offered when I inquired about her foundation, the basis for her faith. She said, “I am not religious. To we Jews living in Russia, being Jewish has nothing to do with God. Being Jewish means to suffer, to be oppressed, to be discriminated against. In Russia, my Jewishness has nothing to do with religion. Rather, I feel Jewish because I am persecuted along with other Jews.”

For a former Soviet Jew, for a Board member of a Reform congregation, for many of us, God doesn’t factor into Jewish identity.

This fact is troubling, for all of our tradition premises itself on the idea that God is central to our Jewish gestalt. At the beginning of our service, we stood and proclaimed “Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad...Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.” Yet all too often, we have rendered that great declaration into: “Hear O Israel, I don’t know Eloheinu; I deny Echad.”

When counseling with those about to be married, with new parents naming their children, even parents as they watch their children prepare to become B’nai Mitzvah, the statement I dread to hear — but hear with great frequency — is the one that Board member and Russian Jew offered, “I am not very religious.” More and more, men, women, and even children express their unwillingness to know God, or even explore the possibility of God.

Perhaps it is that we have failed. Not you, but us — institutional Judaism. We have argued that to be a Jew is to deny Hitler a posthumous victory. We have suggested

that to be a Jew is to support Israel. We have taught that to be a Jew is to be whatever we want it to mean. We can choose to do and not do, to believe and not believe, however we wish. We have lost the ability to speak with God because we have eliminated God. Shema, Yisrael, I don’t know Eloheinu, I deny Echad.

Perhaps it isn’t so important. Perhaps being Jewish is not about God. Perhaps. However, if our tradition has any influence over us, then the evidence weighs against this conclusion.

The prophets of Israel saw God in all good and right human behavior. Micah proclaimed: “It has been told thee, O man, what is good and what the God does require of you: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with Your God.” Justice, mercy, and acknowledging God’s presence as we walk life’s path: these form the bedrock of Judaism. Amos made it even simpler. “Thus says God: Seek Me, and live.” Our days have meaning when we search out God within our lives.

Modern Jews echo the same sentiments. Consider these words by the Nobel laureate and Holocaust documentarian, Elie Wiesel: “[As] a child..., the Jew in me would anticipate Rosh Hashanah [and Yom Kippur] with fear and trembling...On that Day of Awe, I believed then, nations and individuals, Jewish and non-Jewish, are being judged by their common Creator. That is still my belief...I still believe that to be Jewish today means what it meant yesterday and a thousand years ago...To be Jewish today is to recognize that every person is created in the image of God and that our purpose in living is to be a reminder of God.”⁴ Or consider the insights of an anonymous eight-year-old girl from New Jersey, who said: “God is like the light I turn on in my room. God let’s me see what’s there.”⁵

Micah, Amos, Elie Wiesel, a little child from New Jersey — all share common ground in their definition of the Jewish self: to be Jewish means to believe in God...God, the

Creator. God, the Judge. God, the Parent of all humankind. God, the Light in our rooms. We must live our lives cognizant of our relationship with the Divine, for we created in God's image. When God cries out, we are to respond, "Hineini - Here am I."

The problem may be that we think we are supposed to believe literally the stories we read in Torah and the words we read in our prayerbook. We listen each year on Rosh Hashanah to the tale of the Akedah, the Binding of Isaac, and we believe that for God to speak to us, it has to be in a loud voice, "Avraham, Avraham." Booming. Commanding. And what about the prayers we recite on Yom Kippur? When we hear the words of Kol Nidrei, Unetaneh Tokef, Avinu Malkeinu, how do we react to the notion of God judging us based on the vows and promises we keep, on the deeds we perform? Do you believe it? Does your understanding of God involve a Divine being who measures us, who judges us, who determines our destinies? Or do you find that the images fall flat and meaningless, that they neither speak to nor resonate within your soul?

If you struggle with both the words and ideas contained in this book (HOLD UP MACHZOR), you aren't alone. The survey I quoted proves this point. No one we know has ever experienced God in the way we read about God in our prayerbook or the way God is described in the Torah. Never! And so, sadly, we conclude; sadly, we insist that God is not present. In innocent and reasonable resignation, we confess, "Oh, I am not really religious..."

Our mistake, though, is that God does not ask us to believe that we will be called thunderously from out of the Heavens. Instead, I believe it is as Abraham Joshua Heschel declared: God asks us to be "a witness to the presence of God in the world." God does not yell out to us on mountaintops or in the desert. God does not appear to us in burning bushes or pillars of fire. Rather, God urges us only to feel God, to know that God is like the light we turn

on in our rooms. God let's us see what's there.

God is a light, my friends. God is **not** a lightning bolt. As Rabbi Jeffrey Marx writes, "God's voice is a deep whisper, like an underground stream of water. We call it, in our tradition, **kol dmama dakika**: the still, small voice of God. God's whisper does not emanate out of the heavens, God's whisper does not boom down from the mountains, rather, it is very close to us, it is deep inside of us, in our hearts, if only we are open to feeling it. God's voice is a call to life."⁶

When do we experience God? God is all around us, if only we are open to feeling it.

Consider how David Rankin, a Unitarian minister, describes God. "When I was a child, I dwelled in God. It was not a conscious belief, for I did not even know the word, but an open communion with every aspect of life. When I played in the grass, I was rolling on the skin of God. When I swung from the trees, I was hanging in the arms of God. When I gazed up at the stars, I was staring into the eyes of God.

Do you remember the luscious feeling? It was good! The whole earth and all the heavens were God. It seemed to flow through all things, all time, all space... Everything belonged together. In early childhood, God was not a three letter word, a mere piece of language. A leaf in the spring was God. A snowflake on my mitten was God. A butterfly just out of reach was God."⁷

God exists in and of everything. And when we appreciate the world in which we live — when we participate in the world in which we live — when we heal the world in which we live, then we experience God, then we hear that deep whisper, the **kol dmama dakika**: the still, small voice of God.

Perhaps this is what Heschel meant when he wrote, "To be a Jew means to be a witness to the presence of God in the world." To be a Jew means to hear the whisper...not on the mountaintop, but in

the sandbox and in the quiet of our loved one's arms; not in thunder and lightning, but as we touch another's soul and heal another's wounds.

Here is an absolute truth: each one of us here tonight is a good human being. Sure, each of us can be better. That's part of the wonder of being human...we can grow. But essentially – at the core of our beings – there is goodness. As a result, we all do good – and even great – things. We nurture our families. We care for friends. We support noble causes. We participate in community. The question is “why?” What moves us to do these things? Is it simply happenstance? Is it just a quirk of nature that our DNA developed in such a way to be endowed with consciousness? Or is God the link between who we are and what we do? We don't really know. No one can sit down and demonstrate in a “scientific” manner whether God is at play in how we view and interact with the world. But this much we can pretty much all agree on: those who do believe, who have faith in their lives...they view their existence, their decisions, their actions in a holistic fashion that is awe-filled to experience. We may not agree with their choices. But I think we would be hard pressed not to admire the integration they experience.

This thought is sublimely expressed in a poem, written by Mahatma Gandhi:

*There is an indefinable mysterious Power that pervades everything.
I feel It, though I do not see It.
It is this unseen Power which makes Itself felt and yet defies all proof, because It is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses....
That informing Power or Spirit is God....
For I can see that in the midst of death life persists, in the midst of untruth, truth persists, in the midst of darkness light persists.
Hence I gather that God is Life, Truth, Light.
[God] is love.
[God] is supreme good.
But he is no God who merely satisfies the intellect...*

*God to be God must rule the heart and transform it.*⁸

It is time for us to talk about God and talk to God. To say, “Oh, I'm not really religious,” is to leave closed the gates of faith, to be unwilling to at least walk along the path to see where it might lead. Remember, “religious” is not the same as “observant.” Religious is having a pattern of faith and belief that guides us. God – and I cannot tell you exactly what God is or isn't – but God, for me, is the Presence that supports me, sustains me, permits me to be the best that I can be. When I read these words (HOLD UP MACHZOR), I read parable, poem, and perspective...and not precise reality. God is, as Ghandi wrote, “life, truth, light, and love.” Now I cannot make any in this room more of a believer. I have no such power. But perhaps you can for yourself. First, it means listening... listening to your heartbeat, your breathing...listening to your soul. Then, perhaps it means asking, “Am I religious?” or even more daringly, “How can I become religious?” Religious as in more believing. Religious as in more faithful. Just in asking the questions, we open ourselves up to experiencing God and seeing what's in the world in a new and deeper way. And there can be no richer experience than that, to feel that we are God's partner in *tikkun* and *kedusha*, in healing and holiness.

A Hasidic story tells of a father and a child, traveling together on a journey. The berry bushes along the way catch the child's eye and he dawdles in order to pick them. The father, needing to continue the journey, says to his child: I will go ahead, and every now and then I will call to you. As long as you continue to hear the sound of my voice you will know that all is well. But as soon as you stop hearing my voice, listen with all your might to catch my far off whisper. Then, follow that whisper, so we can walk together, again.

My friends, let us strain our ears to hear the whisper of God, the **kol dmama dakka**: God's still, small voice. Along our life journeys, we have been distracted and we

find ourselves so distant from God. But God
is always with us. If we but open our ears
and our hearts, we can hear the whisper

once more. And we can catch up with God,
so that together we might walk, filled with
the blessings of life.

¹ http://www.halfsigma.com/2006/11/jews_dont_belie.html

² http://www.halfsigma.com/2006/11/jews_dont_feel_.html

³Source unknown

⁴Elie Wiesel remarks

⁵Hillel Cohen; op. cit.; p. 5

⁶Jeffrey A. Marx; *Whispers in the Wind*; American Rabbi; Volume 28, Number 4; Summer, 1996, p.8

⁷David O. Rankin; *Growing Up with God*; American Rabbi; Volume 22, Number 5; April, 1990, p.2

⁸ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi; Young India, October 11, 1928; found on the internet:

<http://hinduism.about.com/od/poetry/a/godgandhi.htm>