



Leo Baeck Centre
FOR PROGRESSIVE JUDAISM
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KOL NIDREI 5780 - WHO IS GOD FOR US AND IN THIS BOOK?

If he hadn't been an avowed atheist, walking along the clifftop, he might have been marvelling at God's works – the ocean to the far horizon, the gentle curvature of the earth, and over it all, the most amazing and spectacular sunset. But without warning, the ground below suddenly gave way. He was able to grab on to a large root left sticking out from the collapsed cliff, and hung there as the falling stones bounced off the rock far below. 'What am I supposed to do now?' he thought in panic. He instinctively prayed 'if there *is* a God up there, this might be a good time to prove it'. Instantly he heard a voice saying 'I am with you, my child. Trust in me, have faith that I will save you, and let go of the branch. Glancing down and immediately up again, he calls out 'is there anybody *else* up there?!

This poses the question: Do we believe in God – and if so, what sort of God? Did God leave a root sticking out for the atheist to hold on to? Was it God who told him to let go, and would God really have saved him? Or would the rescue services have come – and is that God working through humanity? Indeed, did God cause the cliff to collapse in the first place or do these things just happen?

Does God forgive us or sentence us for our wrongs? Does God really weigh up our actions over the last year, and decide to seal us in the books of life or death? Given that we are here, a year after last Kol Nidrei, does that mean that God forgave us last year, but punished those who have died over 5779?

Our new machzor, like the siddur, reflects Jewish tradition over the millenia in showing a range of different perspectives on the subject, but not, I hope, the simplistic idea that God is, effectively, a hanging judge, recording anyone for death. I strongly reject the idea that God takes life. God *gives* life, through the natural cycles of the universe, and that life is always finite. Psalm 90 tells us that a normal life is threescore years and ten, or with strength, four score years. Considering it was probably written over 3000 years ago, it is amazing that, according to the UN, the current worldwide average age is today 71! In the developed world, it is higher, however, and in Australia we are one of the highest, at 82.5 years – which should serve as a reminder of the injustice and inequality across our world. The fact is, though, that every aspect of creation has a lifespan – whether it is an insect, a human, or even a mountain or a star.

On Rosh Hashanah we (red) read the Un'tane Tokef, and again tomorrow we will repeat its powerful words – perhaps in part because of its striking tune:

On Rosh HaShanah this is written;

on the Fast of Yom Kippur it is sealed:

How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it;

who will live and who will die;

who will reach the ripeness of age, who will be taken before their time;

who by fire and who by water; who by war and who by beast;

But, we don't understand this literally, any more than we do the Torah. God no more has a quill to scribe our names in the book of life, or death, than was the earth created in 6 days, or was there a worldwide flood that covered even the tops of the highest mountains. These are legends, metaphors, stories with moral messages like Jonathan Swift's Lilliputians or Gepetto's wooden boy who

came alive, and whose nose grew whenever he told a lie! They are precious stories – they contain truth, but they are not literally true!

Our atheist looked up to heaven, where our stories often suggest God lives. 'The Heavens are God's but the earth has God given to humanity'. God comes down from heaven, to check out the wickedness of Noah's generation, to check on the Israelites enslaved in Egypt, and of course to give Torah at Mount Sinai. We say 'avinu shebashamayim' – popularised by Christians as 'Our father who art in heaven'. And humans try to rise up to heaven, to reach God, by building the Tower of Babel, by dreaming of a ladder to God, by worshipping and offering sacrifices in the high places. Ask even a child 'where does God live?' and they will point up, or say 'in heaven'. But persevere – and say 'Really? Is God only in heaven?' and they are likely to point around and say 'no, God is everywhere'. Although I might suggest this is a later idea, we can read it back into the Torah and teachings, as we (red) read on Rosh Hashanah: 'Shall Not the Judge of the Whole Earth Do Justice? (Genesis 18). The mystical Rabbis actually had to prise God away a little from humanity, in order to give us free-will - the freedom to make the right, or the wrong decisions in our lives.

There is an inherent tension or contradiction here and it is perpetuated through the prayers. For example, we read 'God of forgiveness, let these words of sanctity ascend to you' (YK p.149). Clearly God is in heaven – but also b'chol l'vevecha - right here in every heart.

Last year (Mosaic, September 2018), Rabbi Westheimer, Provost of the Jewish Theological Seminary, wrote an article about belief:

‘When we ask congregants to characterize their conception of God’, he wrote, ‘the results suggest a fair amount of confusion, embarrassment, and inarticulateness, even as some hold fast to traditional beliefs. An ambitious American survey, sent out the day after Yom Kippur, shows 60 percent, a significant majority, affirming a *belief* in God, but opinions divide on the *nature* of this God.

Only 45 percent, fewer than half, find evidence of God’s work in the universe, and three quarters reject the traditional conception of a God who “rewards good people and punishes bad ones.” To the survey question of whether God is “just,” 26 percent answered yes, a higher 30 percent no, and 43 percent were unsure. Perhaps the most telling response was that a large number of congregants (200) expressed concerns about justice, such as asking: ‘God, why do bad things happen to good people?’”

However, the respondents did tend to associate God with the capacity of humans to do good, to help the sick and needy, and to offer hope; these resonated with them as ‘godly’ attributes. “Most of my congregants do not construe God as a celestial figure who acts in this world” the rabbi concludes on the basis of the survey. “For them, God is a presence or power. . . not so much ‘above’ us in heaven as . . . ‘beside’ us or ‘within’ us.”

So far as I am concerned, God is a spirit that infuses the universe – the spirit that gives us a sense of the spiritual, of spirituality, and the call and drive to do the right thing. God is the energy. If we liken a mitzvah to a battery, we could say that God is the charge. When a battery is running down, it does not work so well. When it is flat it can’t do anything. When a mitzvah is filled with God’s energy, it is a way of bringing God’s wishes into the world – welcoming the

refugee, feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, healing the sick, consoling the bereaved, and generally caring for God's world. When the mitzvah is short of God's energy and belief, and running down, it is a difficult struggle. And when it is flat, and bereft of any spiritual energy, the action alone, just the mitzvah, the case without inspiration, can be quite ineffective and useless.

Tomorrow morning's Torah portion uses Mitzvah in a similar way, and it might be useful to understand it as the battery, potential container of God's energy. For it tells us 'this mitzvah is not beyond you or far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say: 'Who will go up to heaven for us and get it that we may do it - nor across the sea that you should say 'who will cross the sea and get it so that we may do it?'. No – God is not far away, in heaven or across the sea. There are no excuses. God's energy, God's presence, is very near to you – in your mouth and in your heart, that you can easily sense it and do it.

We do not really make vows and deals with God – the God we may barely think about or believe in unless we are falling off a cliff. We make them with ourselves. In times past, it may have been handy to pledge to God – if we believed that God would indeed punish us if we failed to keep the promise. But for a generation who reject the idea that God inscribes us for punishment, either through intellect or experience, we should recognise that God is in us and acts through us – that by making vows and breaking them, or failing to keep them, or missing the mark, we let ourselves down – and in that way, let God down as well. By making a promise and failing to keep it, we weaken our resolve – next time we make it even harder. We become less reliable – less trustworthy. That erodes us as human beings – we fail to live up to our potential. And that nibbles away at the fabric of society. In that way as well,

we let God down. But, when we keep our vows and promises, we strengthen
ourselves – and God. Let us be more reliable in the New Year - Ken yhi ratzon.