



EVERYTHING CHANGES – AND WE ALSO NEED TO CHANGE.

In a little while, when we conclude tonight's powerful service, we will sing in Yigdal:

Lo yachalif haEl, v'lo yamir dato, l'olamim l'zulato.

God does not change; God's teaching will not be supplanted;

God will always be the same.

The Yigdal is based on Maimonides 13 Principles of Faith. But I would argue with Maimonides, that everything – or at least everything that we can perceive – does change. What we teach about God may not be supplanted but it does develop. Even our translation and interpretation of Yigdal itself changes! So whether God actually does change or not, our perception, or our understanding of God, certainly does.

It seems pretty clear that our ancient ancestors in the desert believed that if they built a sanctuary for God, God would dwell there in their midst with them. Indeed, this is exactly what it was called – Mishkan – a dwelling place; in fact, the dwelling place for the Sh'khina, from the same root, the dwelling spirit. And if you have a great sovereign living amongst you, you must serve them with the finest meats and oils and wines, cakes and breads, you must ensure fine fragrances, and keep the magnificent seven-branched candelabrum burning night and day!

Going even further back, to the first words of Bereshit, we find 'Bereshit, bara Elohim et hashamiyim v'et haaretz'. We know how this is invariably translated – in the beginning, God created..., but another rendering which you might find unsettling, given that monotheism is a basic principle of Judaism, is that Elohim seems to be a plural, and it may say 'In the beginning, the Gods created the heavens and the earth. Certainly just a few chapters later, in the Tower of Babel story, even the verbs are plural, as it records the gods, saying 'Let us go down to see what these humans have done now!'

The Shekinah God that dwells in the Mishkan is a female - or at least the word has feminine form, ending in 'ah' and talking feminine adjectives. More commonly God is

perceived as male – very occasionally the actual word Adonai is used – much more frequently the word is said, whenever we find the tetragrammaton yod hey vav heh. Adon is Lord or Master. However, my lord would be Adoni – Adonai is a plural form – my lords!

I am pointing this out to show how our depictions of God, and the way we perceive the Power of the Universe, have always been changing. In our time, we have understood that this power is not male, not only because that would wrongly imply that males are better, but also because clearly God is far beyond human experience, and beyond our understanding. Our tradition has long taught that we can say much more about what God is not, than what God is! And we can be sure that God is not male – nor female either! Continuing to use the male terms: Lord, King, and Master, and describing God as He, perpetuates inequality and injustice. So, with our siddur, published in 2010, we eliminated all such translations. Instead we have reexamined what the tetragrammaton, the four letters yod, hey, vav, heh, may suggest about God. Martin Buber pointed out that they can be used to make the past, present and future tenses of the verb ‘to be’ – haya, hoveh, yihyeh - in other words God was, is and will be – or God is always-ness – or eternal, as we sing in the second verse of Adon Olam – v’hu haya, v’hu hoveh, v’hu yihyeh b’tifarah – God was, is and always will be, in splendour!

Having degendered the Siddur that we use for Shabbat, weekdays and all the other festivals except Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the Gates of Repentance, which we’ve been using for over forty years, now looks and sounds anachronistic and dated, for this and various other reasons. And so this is the final farewell – the last Kol Nidrei when it will be used. Next year we’ll have our new book, Mishkan T’shuvah – Mishkan, the same word as the Tabernacle in the desert – but here meaning dwelling place of Repentance, of return, of changing ourselves.

The Yigdal, which I started with, continues:

Tzofeh v’yodei · a s’tareinu, mabit l’sof davar b’kadmato
God watches us and knows our secret thoughts;
God perceives the end of every matter before it begins.

Well, we might be willing to accept that God – the mysterious power of the universe, in some way watches over us, and in some way perceives our thoughts. But the next line is more problematic – if only because it seems to contradict another key principle – that of free will. If God knows what is going to happen before it begins, then how can our decisions be free? Indeed, this problem is addressed in that major theological work: *O God*, the film written by Avery Cornman starring John Denver and George Burns and a must-watch for your Netflix list – or we’re showing it again at LBCinema on Chanukah, the Saturday of our Open Weekend, December 8th! The protagonist asks God ‘what do you mean you don’t know – you’re supposed to know everything?’, to which God answers ‘Sure I know everything – just as soon as it happens!’ So perhaps, in our questioning and sometimes cynical world, perhaps we ask harder questions and demand better answers than those who came before us might.

But questions and challenges are good. It is when we stop asking, when we stop arguing, stop caring, that we should be more worried. Questions and engagement are renewing. Indeed, this is what we might call ‘The essence of Judaism’, the name Rabbi Dr Leo Baeck chose for his 1905 book, responding to a work about Christianity that disparaged Judaism, and was called ‘The Essence of Christianity’. We are Israel – and Israel means one who challenges God. Incidentally this also makes an interesting contrast to our younger sibling religion Islam, which claims descent from Abraham through his first son, Yishmael, because Yishmael – as you can hear, the same structure as Yisrael – has a different root. Instead of one who challenges God, Yishmael is one who hears God, reinforcing the idea of hearing, then doing, not arguing!

This evening’s service started with Kol Nidrei, atoning for our vows. The initial idea was that all vows were to be cancelled. Of course, this led to criticism, and accusations that the vow of a Jew could not be trusted, a claim gleefully jumped on by anti-semites to persecute us more. So the Rabbis declared that it only meant vows between people and God, not with other humans. There’s also been variation over the centuries and from region to region about whether it means vows made in the past year, or those to be made in the new year, or both! Again, when looking at Jewish history through the pages of the prayer books of the ages, we see that change is happening all over. Change is the spice of life – and change reflects the needs of life, new understandings,

renewal of meanings and relevance and commitment for each generation. But there is a dialectic tension between change and return. At this time of T'shuvah, we want to return to our true selves, our potential selves, perhaps to the purest innocent souls we were when we first entered the world. Elohai, n'shama shenata bi, t'hora hi – Eternal God, the soul that you gave me was a pure one! We may want to return to the unwavering trust that we feel our ancestors had and we simply lack. But I don't think that is reality. They too had their doubts and questions – for example Abraham and Moses famously question and challenge and argue with God, and this is what they model for us. We are not a people of blind faith, and besides, we don't live in such times either. As we seek tonight to return, as we ask 'Chadesih y'meinu k'kedem' – renew our days as of old, but this is not a request to go back to what and who we were – rather to recover the best of the aspirations, hope and energy of our ancestors, to be strong in our faith in God as our partner through life, to be courageous in standing up for the poor, the oppressed, the sidelined.

I believe that the image of a corkscrew is most useful to us. We want to return, back from the wrong paths, from being distant from our God and our tradition. But, as we work to return, as we approach the faith and commitment of our predecessors, we realise we cannot quite get back to the same place – and nor should we. We have moved on – and the world has moved on – and this circular motion, this cycle of the years, creates a gradual but powerful movement forward – upward, like the corkscrew does. By our re-turning, we incrementally move the world forward. The more we search our souls, the kinder, better, calmer, more caring, more generous, more forgiving people we can be in the year ahead, the more impact we can have on this movement to make a better world. May we not make empty oaths and promises, may we not mislead ourselves or others with false hopes and expectations – may we not make vows which we need to apologise for and cancel next year!