

ON FINDING GOD - THE PHILOSOPHIC OR MYSTIC WAY?
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Given by Rabbi Dr. Herbert M. Baumgard, D.H.L.
Temple Beth Am, Miami, Fla.

The Jewish mystics teach, "Each person understands God in terms of his own greatness". While all of the mystics may be described as deeply religious, they can see that while some of their members seem to be in contact with God continuously, others rarely find Him, and when they do, it is only for a fleeting moment. To some of the mystics, God is like an ever-glowing fire; to others, he is merely a flickering pale light in the distance. Each person, the Hasidim teach, experiences God in a unique fashion peculiar to his own inner sensitivity and development. The poet says it this way, "Some people see more between sunsets than others do in a lifetime".

I am convinced that this insight of the mystics and the poets is valid. There is but one God but there are as many different ideas of God as there are people. When we pray, we all use the word "God", but each of us means something different by that word. What we mean is determined in part by what we have been taught and by what we have been able to take from that teaching. What we mean by the word "God" is defined in part by the events of our life, and in part, by the way our parents treated us. Our emotional and intellectual development, our ability to conceive of greatness, our ability to be hopeful, to give and receive love, all of these factors help determine our relationship to God.

For example, many years ago a young member of our congregation died in his early thirties. His son, about fourteen years of age, became very bitter. "I hate God", he proclaimed at first. In later years, he professed to being an atheist. The son could not believe in a God who would permit his beloved father to die so young. Clearly, the events of our life help determine our attitudes concerning God.

But experience is not the sole determinant of our belief. Other factors, some of them immeasurable, help to determine our religious orientation. A story in point: Some years ago, I performed a wedding for a couple in late middle age. That woman had a number tattooed on her forearm, a remnant of her Nazi concentration camp experience. When the ceremony was over, the woman peered directly into my eyes as if looking for a secret message. She grasped my hand and said fervently, "A good Rabbi; surely, this is a sign that God will be good to me". Her words were more than an expression of faith. They were a command from one who had suffered over-much. Some people are not only believers in help from God, they demand that God stand up and be God-like. This religiously oriented audacity is especially prominent amongst Jews.

PHILOSOPHIC APPROACHES

Although there are as many interpretations of God as there are people, we can divide these interpretations into several broad

categories, in order that we might better understand and discuss them. Into the first of these categories, we might put all of the intellectual or universalistic interpretations of God. Some people are able to relate to God because they perceive that a superior intelligence is at work in the universe. They see this intelligence ordering the universe, supporting it, and guiding it. Such a person appreciates God as the creator of galaxies and atoms. He sees God as a detached force which does its work impersonally through eons of time. This is the God whom our Hebrew fathers called the "Ale Norah, the awesome God" who lifted up mountains and carved our valleys. This is the "Ahdonai Tz'vahot, the Lord of the Host of Stars". This is the "Koneh ha-kol" of the prayer-book, "the owner of all things", in whose hands we are but dust. The Psalmist spoke of this God when he proclaimed, "When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars which Thou hast established, (I am impelled to ask) 'What is man that Thou art mindful of him, and the children of man, that Thou even thinkest of them?'".

Philosophers speak of this God who is beyond our reach. He is "the first cause" without which no other creation could take place, or He is the "ground" or "seed" out of which all other things grow and change, although God Himself does not change.

Judaism has much of philosophy in it, although it is not merely a philosophic religion. The name for God given to Moses is all by itself a philosophic treatise on the nature of God. The name is spelled out in four letters without vowels, yod, hay, vav, hay. We usually read this word as "Ahdonai". The name is deliberately vague and pregnant with many kinds of meaning. Martin Buber suggests that this unique name for God means, "He who is always present", that is "the ever present God". The name could also mean, "He who creates". It is worthy of noting that in all the history of religion this name never occurs anywhere else, so it is obvious that our fathers were trying to describe a different kind of God when they applied this name to the God of the Hebrews.

For almost all philosophers, God is independent and works alone. He needs no one else's help. Here is where the Hebrew philosophers who helped write the Bible, departed from pure philosophy. They taught that God needs and appoints special agents to help Him in His work. Through the story of Adam and Eve, they tried to show that God has appointed all mankind as His partner in the creation that never ends. "Here is the world", God said to Adam and Eve. "It is yours to conquer and to govern. Only make certain that you govern it according to my plan and purpose". Later on our Bible contends that God appointed certain individuals and a special people to serve Him in a particularly intimate relationship of responsibility. That people of course was the Jewish people. In the Midrash, the collection of stories about the Bible, as developed by the Rabbis, we are told that God places his ultimate effectiveness in the hands of the Jewish people. He is quoted as saying to them, "Without you, I am not God"! The Rabbis did not think it odd that the Lord of all

the world could say to the Jews, "Unless you practice and teach My laws, I will have little influence in this world". Long before the development of humanism as a separate philosophy, Judaism had filled its theology with a strong humanistic element. This is formal language for saying that humanism has its roots in Jewish religious philosophy which taught that God needed man as His helper, as surely as man needed God.

MYSTIC APPROACHES

Generally speaking, intellectuals find it difficult to relate to God on a personal basis. Their prayer is confined to thinking about God. This may involve merely philosophic ideas or it may involve mathematical systems developed in support of those ideas. The American philosopher, Whitehead, proved his religious ideas though mathematical formulae and working with this theorems and his proofs was for him a religious experience. We cannot say that this is not a valid and intense religious mood, but we can say that this would hardly satisfy the mystic.

For the mystic, prayer is an emotional experience rather than an intellectual experience. When the Hasidim teach, "Pray to God with all your limbs", they mean that every aspect of our being must be directed towards God, not just the mind. This is why the Hasidim bend and sway when they pray. Above all the Hasidim teach, pray with all your heart and all your yearning. Call God, "Father", they teach, until He becomes your Father. Force Him to turn His face towards you, because you yearn with such power.

Our Bible has both the philosophic and the mystic approach to understanding God. The early chapters of Genesis speak of a creator-God who seems more concerned with the vast universe than with tiny man, but Abraham, we are told, walked with God in his garden and chatted with Him as with a friend. Jacob, the Bible records, was so near to God that he actually wrestled with Him in a dream when Jacob confronted his own guilt, relative to the taking of his brother's birthright. The Book of Job describes the attempt of some Jewish thinkers to resolve the question, "Is God a personal God or a universal God?" In the Character of Job, the Jewish philosopher asks, "Oh Lord, I have always been righteous and faithful, why then do I suffer so terribly?". Job does not get an answer expressed in personal terms, and the answer he is forced to accept leaves the impression that the individual cannot hope to understand the intricate workings of the divine. Job is so over-awed by the arguments of God that he trembles in humility and apologizes for having had the audacity to demand that the plan for the universe be revealed in the simple terms of his personal life. Job is told that good and evil are to be measured, not in terms of personal reward, but on the balance of huge historic movements and great expanses of time.

The Jewish mystic, on the other hand, sees no contradiction in a God who is both personal and universal. One noted Hasidic Rabbi proclaimed, "Oh Lord, I do not ask why I suffer, but only if I suffer for your sake". The tendency of the mystic is to emphasize God's life rather than his own, and he says in faith, "Thy will be done, not mine". The joy of the mystic is that God use his life as God wills it to be used. Still, for the mystic, this relationship with God is extremely personal. The philosopher is concerned with the grand flow of human history but not with individual destiny. The mystic knows that God loves every leaf on every flower and that He is as much concerned with an ant as with the world-wide upheavals. For the mystic, the critical time is now. God must answer when the person in pain calls. The philosopher wants to know that God plans. The mystic wants to know that God cares.

The problem of the universal as against the personal God comes to a crisis in an incident concerning the Prophet Elijah around 875 BCE (1 Kings 19: 9 ff). Elijah was engaged in a bitter struggle with Queen Jezebel who not only worshipped a foreign god but tried to extinguish all the teachers of Judaism. Queen Jezebel sent soldiers to find and kill Elijah who hid in a cave. The Prophet prayed to God, and he wondered, "How shall I know that God has answered me?". The pagans had long taught that the gods speak by way of thunder, lightening, earthquake, or other external signs. Peering out of his cave, Elijah saw the lightening, heard the thunder, and observed the fire and the earthquake, but he knew instinctively that God did not speak in this way. Finally, the story tells us, Elijah heard "A kol d'mamah dakah, a still small voice", a quiet voice within himself, and he knew that this was the "voice" of God. Elijah established the principle, for those capable of believing it, that God is the other side of our better selves, and he speaks to us through the developed conscience, through our nobler yearnings.

The Jewish mystics carried the teaching of Elijah to an ultimate extreme. When God created man, they taught, he placed a spark of himself in each created thing. Ever since then, the divine spark in man has been drawn as if by electrical magnetism to that more of itself which we call God. For the mystic, then, prayer is not a matter of rational thought; it is entirely involuntary. We pray because we can't help ourselves, because a part of us is drawn, in spite of ourselves, to its magnetic source.

We can see that Judaism contains both the mystic and the philosophic approach to an understanding of God. Which way is the more correct? This is a question Judaism does not ask. Our tradition does not insist on this or that in pondering such secrets as the nature of God. Rather the Rabbis have always taught, this and that. "These and these", the Talmud teaches, "are the words of the Living God". All efforts in the name of God, all searching towards Him bears the divine imprint. Learn what you can from each of these systems, or choose one for your main emphasis if you are capable of making a choice and living by it.

THE LEGAL-ETHICAL APPROACH

There is a third movement at work within Judaism which provides a common meeting ground for both the intellectual and emotional thrusts of our faith. We might call this the legal or ethical movement. More than any other religion in the history of man, Judaism provides a series of detailed laws applying to specific situations as a requirement for all Jews. The New Testament is unlike the Old Testament in that it presents general rather than specific rules of conduct. Paul, who fashioned Christianity, sought to do away with the specific Jewish laws in favor of a salvation cult. Eastern mysticism, like Hinduism, may be similar to Jewish mysticism in many ways, but the two part company precisely at the point of the ethical law. Eastern mysticism claims to teach a way that is above the ethical law and therefore has no use for it.

That which makes Judaism different from all other religions is its concept of Torah. The Torah, as a book, contains high philosophy and a description of personal religious experiences, but above all, it is a law book. The Torah speaks of love, yes, but it insists upon justice. It speaks of mystery, but it requires that you treat your fellow man in a certain manner. It does not merely say, "Love your neighbor", it says you are required to leave the crops in the corner of your fields for the poor. It does not merely say to "Help the widow"; it says that the fallen fruit in your orchard must be left for her. It does not merely say to "Help your enemy", it provides that if you see his donkey crushed to the ground by its burden, you must help ease the burden and help raise the donkey, both for the donkey's sake and for the sake of your enemy. It is this ethical and legal tradition that binds all Jews to God in a brit or covenant whereby we are pledged to set an example through our especially dedicated behavior. In the end, our fathers taught, what matters most is not how you conceive of God, but whether you follow his law.

Moses began this legal movement in Judaism. Through long centuries its guardians were the Prophets. After the Prophets came the Pharisees who helped develop the Talmud. The Talmud is a collection of laws, based on the laws of the Bible, readapted to new requirements in a new age. The Talmud was the mainstay of all Jewish life until 150 years ago and is still the core of Orthodoxy. While Reform Jews do not look to the Talmud as their ultimate authority, it is still our source book for understanding the inflections and nuances of Jewish teaching. We who are not afraid to change certain aspects of ancient Jewish law must be all the more careful lest we begin to live purely in terms of abstract principles which are not rooted in our time-tested way of life. This is another way of saying, to live merely by the golden rule is a trap, for such living leads us away from that distinctiveness which has made Judaism more vital and enduring than other religions.

The genius of Judaism was that it found this common ground between philosophy and mysticism. Philosophy which is not grounded by ethical law can disintegrate into vague and idealistic thought unattached to immediate and personal human problems. There are too many philosophers today, young and old, who love the world but hate the members of their own family. Similarly, mysticism which is not restrained by requirements of Torah can become sheer fantasy. You can't help to restrain evil when you have your eyes shut to what's happening outside of yourself. This is why the greatest Jewish philosophers were also great students of Torah and Talmud.

Maimonides and Sadya differ from their Greek mentors, Aristotle and Plato, in just this detail. The greatest Jewish mystics were also rooted in the Torah. Instead of leading his disciples away from the ethical law, the Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidism, taught his followers to perform the simplest law with extraordinary enthusiasm. The Prophets were also careful not to substitute their personal message from God for the Torah which had preceded them. The prophetic proclamations were reinforcements of and interpretations of existing law.

With the Torah as background and stabilizer, we modern Jews need not be afraid to go searching for a greater understanding of God. Indeed if you are a person of average sensitivity, you will not be able to resist walking at least a short way down one of the paths to God which we have discussed. It would be most appropriate during these solemn days between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur for us to do some serious exploring in these areas. Sometimes just one little step forward can lead to discoveries which can change a life. Maybe we can be as fortunate as Job, who once thought of God in the traditional way of his time and, after much searching, exclaimed, "Oh Lord, I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, but now I have seen Thee face to face".

It is one thing to use the word God because everyone else uses it, but it is another thing to sense God as a living reality, to see God as a burning bush which is never consumed, to hear Him as the still small voice within, and to confirm Him as that personal mentor of the people Israel, who said to them, as to you, "Without you I am not God"!

Let us pray that such an experience may be increasingly ours in the year that lies ahead.