

Trusting in God
Rosh Hashanah 5777 Day Two
October 4, 2016
Temple B'nai Shalom
Braintree, Massachusetts
Rabbi Van Lanckton

I have a personal question for each person here.

Do you believe in God?

Imagine you and I are in a private conversation, just the two of us.

In that imagined conversation, how would you answer my question?

Do you believe in God?

I think about half of you would answer, “No, Rabbi, I don’t believe in God.”

A summary of a recent Harris Poll said that 52% of Jews responded that they don’t believe in God.

When I ask, “Do you believe in God?”, however, the best Jewish answer would be to ask me a question. In fact, two questions: “Rabbi, what do you mean when you say ‘believe’ and what do you mean when you say ‘God?’”

To explain what I mean by the word “believe” I first need to explain what I mean by the word “God.”

One idea of what we might mean by the word “God” is a God Who operates without regard to the rules of nature, Who responds to prayer by hearing and taking action in miraculous fashion. This idea of God is often presented in simplistic fashion as an old man with a long white beard sitting in the clouds, listening to our prayers and granting or denying our wishes.

Critics of religion will sometimes offer proofs to establish that there is no such God. From this they argue that there is no value in religion.

These critics do not understand that we can be fully Jewish and yet each of us may have different conceptions of God. We do not need to believe that God is like an old man seated on a throne in the sky.

There are many ways to understand God. To participate in Jewish religious life, we do not have to believe literally in God as God is described in Torah. Those descriptions are metaphorical images. They are not the reality of

God. We can have different ideas concerning the reality of God than the images presented in Torah.

We may also disagree with each other in our ideas about God, and we may change our opinions as we go through life.

A rabbi for whom I have the deepest respect is Rabbi Harold Kushner. He has written a new book. Thank you, Alice, for getting me this book for my birthday. The book is called *Nine Essential Things I've Learned About Life*.

Rabbi Kushner speaks directly to both our questions: the possible meanings of "God" and the possible meanings of "belief."

Rabbi Kushner does not think that God is a large person who lives in the sky or is anything like Santa Claus. God does not know who has been naughty and who has been nice and does not grant or deny our wishes accordingly.

Rather than presuming to define God, and thus effectively saying that we know everything there is to know about God, Rabbi Kushner rather asks us to see that the effort to appreciate what God can mean in our lives is an ongoing, never-ending effort.

To Rabbi Kushner, God is more like courage or love, affecting all people but affecting each one of us differently, according to who we are and our needs in the moment.

Rabbi Kushner invites us to think of the term "God" as a verb rather than as a noun. One word for God in Hebrew, a word we pronounce as Adonai, is a verb form that means approximately "Is Was Will Be."

The word "God" does not refer to a divine actor who makes or does not make certain things happen. Instead, "God" can mean that, in certain moments, certain things happen that testify to the presence and activity of God. God is present in such moments. Our question then is no longer "Where is God?" but "When is God?"

No scientist has ever seen an electron, but all scientists agree that electrons exist. After certain phenomena have occurred, scientists can tell that they were the result of electrons.

Similarly, Rabbi Kushner sees God working in the world not through direct observation but by results. This idea is expressed in Torah when Moses asks to see God's face. God replies [or Moses understands that God is replying] by denying that request, saying that Moses will know God only after God have passed by. Rabbi Kushner comments on this passage that we cannot see God

directly. But we can see, if we look, the difference that God has made in people's lives.

We also need to understand what we mean by the word "believe" in the question "Do you believe in God?" Rabbi Kushner answers that question as follows:

The word "belief" does not have to mean agreeing with factual statements or propositions. Rather, the word "believe" may be related, he says, to the German word *lieben*, "to love." The affirmation "I believe in God" does not have to mean "I am convinced that God exists." Rather, the approximate meaning of that sentence could be, "I care deeply about God. I trust God. I choose to live in loyalty to God."

Rabbi Kushner illustrates with the following example.

Suppose a married man travels away from home on business four days a week. Suppose that someone asks his wife, "Do you ever worry about your husband spending all that time away with so many temptations of other women in his company?" The loyal wife might reply, "Oh, no. I believe in my husband."

In saying "I believe in my husband," she is not affirming his existence. To say that you believe in a person is to say that you trust him, you can rely on him.

To believe in God is not to affirm the fact of God's existence. To believe in God means to trust God, to rely on God to be present when you are afflicted by despair, to lighten your burden when you are downhearted, to accompany you in travail, and to give you determination, inspiration and strength to work for a better world.

Here are three examples of what I have been saying.

My first example is Danny Siegel. He is an American author, lecturer, and poet. He has spoken in more than 500 North American communities, to communal organizations, synagogues, JCC's, Federations and day schools. His mission in life is to encourage people to do mitzvot, and particularly to participate in tzedakah projects.

Here is just one of hundreds of examples. Danny came to the Schechter school in Newton when Alice was teaching there. He described tzedakah projects in Israel he wanted people to support. One of these was a charity that provided bridal gowns for poor brides who could not afford them. Danny explained that a bridal gown can typically be worn seven times before it wears

out. Most brides, at least in America, however, wear their gowns only once and then stash them in a closet.

Danny asked that people who had a bridal gown they were not going to need again to send that gown to the Israeli charity that made them available to be used by many poor brides. Alice did just that with her bridal gown the very next day.

Danny has been doing this work for over forty years. God is working through Danny Siegel.

My second example is Myriam Mendilow. Myriam is one of the people Danny calls a "Mitzvah Hero." In 1962 she created an organization in Jerusalem called Yad LaKashish in Hebrew, Lifeline for the Old in English. It serves Jerusalem's poor, elderly residents not with handouts but with the opportunity to use their creativity. [See info at the link [HERE.](#)]

The organization's guiding principle is that the elderly must be allowed to remain a productive factor in our society. In the artistic workshops it operates, elderly Jews receive training and financial reimbursement for their work. In addition, they are provided with an extensive system of services such as free hot lunch, travel fare, dental care, all this in addition to intergenerational programs and a supportive and creative community in which they work on a daily basis.

Alice and I visited Yad LaKashish when we lived in Israel for six weeks in the summer of 2007. The artistic work they were doing was both beautiful and practical. We bought several items such as an embroidered pushke we are still using. We were inspired to see the enthusiasm of the participants, old people who would otherwise be abandoned.

God is working through Myriam Mendilow.

My third example is Tanya Goldwyn. Alice and I met her at a Sunday brunch two weeks ago.

Following a suggestion by her rabbi at Temple Israel in Boston, Tanya is arranging for medical care and support for a little boy, eighteen months old. His name is Delibreen Ajeel Muhseen. When we spoke, Tanya had not yet met him.

Delibreen is a member of the Yazidis, the religious minority in Iraq that has been targeted for slaughter by ISIS. Delibreen and his family escaped to a refugee camp. As often happens in those camps, however, there was a fire in the family's tent. The fire burned Delibreen horribly. He lost half his face, including all sight in his right eye.

Tanya and others are helping Delibreen by bringing him to Boston where he will receive free medical care for his burns from the Shriner Hospital. Tanya is arranging shelter and support for Delibreen and his family during his recuperations from the multiple surgeries he will need.

Tanya is taking on this mitzvah because her rabbi asked her to do it and Delibreen needs her help. [For info on the international effort to rescue Yazidis and other refugees, see link [HERE.](#)]

God is working through Danny Siegel and Myriam Mendilow and Tanya Goldwyn.

We do not have to create large scale charities in order to work with God to improve the world. As Tanya demonstrates, we can help a single person. We also know that right here in this congregation. We all know people here who visit congregants who are sick, people who comfort others in bereavement, and people who do simple mitzvot like shopping for food or giving someone a ride to shul or to the doctor's office. They are all doing God's work, and so can we.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks of Great Britain assures us in the following words that God is very near to us.

God is present in the poetry of the psalms, the greatest literature of the soul ever written. God is listening in to our debates as we study a page of the Talmud or offer new interpretations of ancient texts. God is with us in the joy of the festivals, the tears of Tisha B'Av, the echoes of the shofar of Rosh Hashanah and the contrition of Yom Kippur. God infuses the very air of the land of Israel and the stones of Jerusalem, where the oldest of the old and the newest of the new mingle together like close friends.

It is true that we call God creator, sovereign, supreme power, first cause, mover of the planets and the stars. But God is also parent, partner, lover, friend.

Rabbi Sacks urges us to thank God every morning for the gift of life. Say the Shema twice daily for the gift of love. Join our voices to others in prayer so that the spirit of God may flow through us, giving us the strength and courage to change the world.

To find God we don't have to climb to heaven or cross the sea. The voice of God is the voice we hear in the silence of the soul. God's light is the light we see when we open our eyes to wonder. God's hand is the hand we touch in the pit of despair.

The critics of religion are wrong. The point of living a religious life is not to figure out the truth or falsity of propositions about the existence or non-existence of God by rational thought and our intellect. The point of living a religious life in a religious community is to deepen our gratitude, our wonder and our amazement for the world in which we are privileged to live, and to respond to the needs of the world by doing our part to help.

As we begin another year, I hope we will each find our own authentic way to enter into or refresh our relationship with God and to act meaningfully as Jews and as citizens of this amazing world.