

I told a student that I was old. He said, "You're not old." I said that I was 56. He looked at me ... "You are old!" In a moment of "GEE THANKS," I took solace in the sentiment that 56 is the new 35. But, you know, at 35, I was beginning a new career, being just ordained and moving to Florence, SC. I don't think I have the energy to go through all of that again. At 35, I still had a child to be born. I love Rachel, but, I don't think I want another one, and Lori told me she would shoot me if that happened. Rachel somewhat jokingly asked Lori and I for a baby brother or sister. Emphatically we answered, "No!" She then suggested that it would be a really good mitzvah to adopt a baby from Haiti. Ah-h-h-h NO! We already have Diogo, Doug, Corey, Joshua, Dani, Ilana, and Rachel. Oh ... right ... at 35, I had not yet even heard of Diogo -- he came out of nowhere as an exchange student from Berlin! We may try another exchange student later on ... but cannot ever hope to find another Diogo. At thirty five, I could not have imagined being a father-in-law ... much less a grandfather!

(PAUSE) You know, there are some things that I did ... or could do at 35 that I am just not interested in doing again ... ever.

At 56, in truth, I am blessed. I am in better shape than I was at 35. Recently, I fit back into the suit I wore to ordination. Even more recently, I just gave it to Goodwill -- it is too big. I can do all sorts of

things that I thought were destined for only reminiscence. There are a few things that I can do now ... that I am not sure I could have done at 20 (when I was in great shape), never mind 35. At 56, I am still celebrating a new marriage; Lori and I are rounding 6 years. Cindy will never “NOT” be part of my life. She passed away 8 years ago. I always dreamt of celebrating a 50th anniversary, but, Lori, I love you, but don’t think I am going to make it. I will try to make it 25 or 30, but let’s get to 10 first! At 35, married for already 10 years to Cindy, I never dreamt I would be a widower. I never dreamt of remarrying and growing old with someone else. At 35 I had three parents, at 56, I now have four. At 35, I had three children. Including Adam our son-in-law, and Emily, about to become our daughter in law, we now have 9.

Oh my, my, any wonder why Lori responded to Rachel that way?

This week, Lori, we become grandparents. My daughter Corey had you help pick out her wedding dress. You helped pick out the food for the wedding. You and I watched, as the first of our “Brady Bunch” brood walked the aisle ... and now, we are about to be grandparents.

WOW! You know, I know I am blessed every day. All this! I am not unaware, though, that part of my process and growth rooted in pain. Certainly, I am not unaware of the madness in the world. In a month, we will go to the polls, and know that whichever candidate you support, there are concerns about the candidates and process

unparalleled in history. Never mind the demeanor of the national, state, or local candidates, we now know that electronic voting polls are hacked. I am sure that I will have more to say on all this over the course of these holy days, but even as I look at my own journey and go, “WOW,” I have to be concerned. We walk in worlds of blessings and challenges. For so many people, they get upset when things do not go their way, they blame others ... they blame God, completely discounting the appreciation for the blessings that they take for granted, along the way. Or, they give it all to God, blessings and curses, and divest themselves from the process. You know the saying, “Man plans, and God laughs.” I don’t think I believe that God works that way. I believe in something much bigger than anything I can imagine, and you know I believe in angels and miracles, but I struggle to figure out how to best partner with ... whatever God is. I am blessed every day ... I try to figure out how to best partner with whatever is the source of my blessings.

With all that is happening in my world; and in the world; with all of the rhetoric about the times I hear people put God into their narrow boxes; I have had to spend a lot of time thinking about God lately. Good, bad or blasphemous ... I wanted to share these thoughts with you. So, tonight -- we talk about God. I want to spend tonight talking about what God is ... or is not ... or might be ... or perhaps just about what God may or may not do.

Two of my colleagues, Daniel Syme and Rifat Sonsino wrote a book, "Finding God." This book elucidates 16 different concepts as to what God is ... according to Judaism. No, we do not all agree as to what God is, and truth be told, most people cannot agree on this matter, not just Jews. We only think we have the market cornered on disagreement ... you know ten Jews and thirty-two opinions. As to God, we accept de facto that there is something beyond us; something responsible for everything in here and out there. Judaism's "God" focus, though is far more about how we serve and partner with God ... whatever God is, than worrying about what God is. For this reason, Jews have never spent a lot of time talking about God, but given how caught up in the secular world that we tend to be, I think that we should. In Egypt, we were avdae mitzrayim - servants to Egypt. When freed, the Torah teaches us that we became avdae Elohim - Servants to God. The conundrum, though, is that this same Torah never really tells us what God is.

There are 72 different names for God in the Jewish Bible. In our liturgy, we read "Mi Khamokha ba-aelim Adonai - Who is like you among all the Gods that are worshiped." In the Ten Commandments, one reads, "Lo yi-h'yeh Elohim akhaerim al p'nai - You shall have no other Gods before me." The literal text says "before me," not "other than me." Yet, still, in Deuteronomy, we read the words of the Shema,

"Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohaenu, Adonai, Ekhad -- there is but one God." So, even Torah takes the "God" piece ambiguously. Ultimately, though, as I said, in our tradition, the answer does not matter. Maimonides tells us that it is blasphemy to attempt to define God because it makes God finite. Even saying what God is not ... borders on blasphemy. So, as Jews, we are unique in the West -- and far more like the East. Trying to pin God down is pointless. What matters is what we do with God, for whether the collective mind, a force in the winds or the old man on the highest of mountain peaks, our job is the same. We have to take care of all that God -- whatever God is -- has brought forth -- motzaee min ha-aretz.

What does the Torah say that God says God is? God describes God's self as, "Eh-yeh asher Eh-yeh." I am what I am ... or I was what I was ... I was what I will be The Hebrew language is not always clear and definite. At Sinai, when God sends Moses to Pharaoh, Moses asks who God is. God's response in the text is not time or tense specific, and the best one can determine is that God is telling Moses, "I exist ... tell them that I am ... I was ... I will be ... that is what they need to know." Rabbi David Cooper wrote, "God is ... A Verb," ... the verb "to be." In any event, lesson one for the holiday is quite simple, but incredibly profound. Jews are not concerned with what God is – we accept that in some form or another ... God is ... and in the sense that God is a verb,

we must serve God by ... GODDING – living as God “lives.” Godding is a term used by Rabbi Cooper to describe living in a way that intentionally celebrates being. Our tradition teaches us that we best do this by serving the community and by caring for each other. Where we fail to be intentional in living ethically, we allow for chaos to take hold. Maimonides teaches us that evil is the absence of intentional good. Where God is, evil is not. Where we feel and see spiritually beyond ourselves, the void between us – separating us – fills.

We lost one of history’s greatest ethical teachers, one of the most compassionate people with whom I have ever engaged. I had the opportunity to have dinner with Elie Weisel before he spoke at Centre College in Kentucky. I will have more to say about him later, but I got to hear from his mouth thoughts on his play, “THE TRIAL OF GOD.” I struggled mightily with this book and play. If you have not read it or seen it; you need to do so. Elie Weisel accepted the theological truth that “Where God is, evil is not.”

The play "The Trial Of God" prosecutes God for abandoning the covenant of peace with people who suffer oppression. While set in a different era, this drama puts God on trial for the Shoah – what we commonly call the Holocaust. God has no justification for the death and suffering “God” has caused, and no one is willing to defend God until a

stranger appears ... a stranger who happens to be Satan. The trial actually never concludes, and a verdict is never rendered.

The point of the story is not to determine God's guilt or innocence. In the midst of the trial, in the midst of the trauma, the characters prayed and sought to defend themselves from another pending pogrom; ultimately, in the face of an oncoming hoard bent on violence, they still defend God. If they truly believed that God wanted them destroyed ... they would not have fought or prayed. They would simply scorn God and accept their plight. To ignore God's dignity or God's call for our own dignity is just not within us. Weisel argued that even in anger, there is respect and love. "For a Jew to believe in God is good. For a Jew to protest against God is still good. But simply to ignore God--that is not good. Anger, yes. Protest, yes. Affirmation, yes. But indifference? No. (PAUSE) You can be a Jew with God. You can be a Jew against God. But not without God." ... As parents, we know our own children love us and hate us, but either way, they know we are there. It is when we no longer exist to them that our foundation shakes.

Tonight, and throughout the holiday season, I need you to think about what you believe God to be. The prayers that we speak make absolutely no sense if we speak them into a void – to nothingness. They cannot comfort us or heal us – they cannot move us if they are simply an exercise in synchronistic reading. There are no gold medals to be

awarded because we sound better as a congregation than the one across town or any around the world. No halakha exists that says a service has to last a certain number of hours to count. So, there is no law that required a lot of pages to read to fill the time.

So, what is God? ... I do not have a clue. Is God the “Old Man” on the mountain with the staff or the “Mother” of all life? Is God the forces of nature? Is God the collective “Id?” Is God the forces of physics? For all I know, the Humanists may be right, and God is our collective consciousness. I do absolutely believe that God is, and I have to agree with Maimonides that whatever God is, it is the source of Goodness and potentiality. We segregate ourselves from God and destroy some piece of the world every time we have a fight over who owns God, who best describes God ... who best represents God. I cannot fit God into my little box, and if I could, the world could not be as beautiful and potentially magnificent as it is. I see proof that there is something bigger than me everywhere I look in this world. What I do absolutely also believe, is that whatever God is, within God there is incredible power. How can you look into the eyes of someone you love and not feel a force beyond that which you can rationally explain? Our tradition teaches us that we are not only a mamleket kohanim – a kingdom of priests, but also we are just less than divine. We ... are God’s angels, we show up and change lives. Prayer really has little to

do with the words you read or sing, and everything to do with what those words or melodies lead you to do ... and to be ... in the work of healing your world and the world ... the whole world. This is not about being Orthodox or Reform ... or Jewish at all. God is certainly bigger than our religion, and despite what our own fundamentalists claim, ours is no more or less than any other faith tradition in God's eyes. Chosenness is about choosing to have faith – in something, not about God choosing one of us over others of us. And, in this spirit, we have to know that if our prayers are only for us and for our own well being, then they will go unanswered, because you cannot hope to stay afloat in a boat where holes exist – even where not under your seat.

There is a story of a voyaging ship that wrecked during a storm at sea and only two of the men on it were able to swim to a small, desert like island.

The two survivors separated and inhabited different sides of the island. The first thing they prayed for was food. The next morning, the first man saw a fruit-bearing tree on his side of the land, and he was able to eat its fruit. The other man's parcel of land remained barren.

After a week, the first man was lonely, and he decided to pray for a wife. The next day, another ship wrecked, and the only survivor was a

woman who swam to his side of the land. On the other side of the island, there was nothing.

Soon the first man prayed for a house, clothes, more food. The next day, like magic, all of these were given to him. However, the second man still had nothing.

Finally, the first man prayed for a ship, so that he and his wife could leave the island. In the morning, he found a ship docked at his side of the island. The first man boarded the ship with his wife and decided to leave the second man on the island.

He considered the other man unworthy to receive God's blessings since none of his prayers had been answered. As the ship was about to leave, the first man heard a voice from heaven booming, "Why are you leaving your companion on the island?"

"My blessings are mine alone since I was the one who prayed for them," the first man answered. "His prayers were all unanswered, and so he does not deserve anything."

"You are mistaken!" the voice rebuked him. "He had only one prayer, which I answered."

"Tell me," the first man asked the voice, "What did he pray for that I be concerned for him?"

“He prayed that all your prayers be answered.”

For all we know, our blessings are not the fruits of our prayers alone, but those of others so focused beyond themselves that, content with their own lot, they devote their energy to others than themselves.

Dolly Levy, in “Hello Dolly,” argued that wealth was only good if it was treated like manure and spread around. The comedic reference aside, how can we ever feel blessed when we alone are whole? Golda Meier said that if one is oppressed, none can be free.

Let’s take some time during this holy day season and pray for each other.

One of my favorite book titles is, “There is no Messiah ... and you are it.” Each one of us has doubt that this world will ever be whole and at peace. It is absolutely that doubt that will prove our greatest strength ... our greatest tool ... and our greatest challenge. It will not happen without our faithful prayer ... the prayer of action, compassion, and love. May this holiday season that we welcome tonight bring health and peace to all of our world. May we grow in spirit and in love ... and absolutely ... in faith, and may this work to change the world of noise into the one of peace for which we desperately pray. Amen.