

Pleasantville Community Synagogue, Rosh Hashanah 5781/2020
Sermon: Where is God in all this?
Rabbi Julie Hilton Danan, Ph.D.

This spring, at the height of the pandemic here in New York, we celebrated Passover. For the first time I really homed in on the fact that our foundational Exodus story centers on a plague that brings disease and death to many, the plague of the firstborn. While we read in the Haggadah about our ancestors avoiding their plague by hunkering down at home, we were doing the exact same thing, the main difference being that we didn't paint lamb's blood on our doorposts.

One thing that this pandemic has done for many of us is it to return us to history, to a sense that perhaps we are not so different from our ancestors after all. It has eroded any notion that we modern people have transcended the tribulations of the human condition. Our ancestors sought many meanings for their suffering and their recoveries. The beauty of Judaism is that there are lots of questions but never just one answer. Almost every book of the Hebrew Bible and later Jewish tradition offers us a different theology to choose from.

For most of us, the COVID-19 pandemic is a purely natural event. A novel coronavirus migrated from animal hosts to human beings, and spread rapidly around the globe. But while our scientific understanding explains the *how* of the pandemic, it doesn't satisfy our psychological need to explain to justify *why* bad things happen to (pretty) good species. For that, we may turn to theology. As I said last night, and we will explore in our study tomorrow, one of the ways that we find resilience is by making meaning from our suffering. So this morning, allow me to share with you three of the many possible Jewish theological approaches to finding meaning—or even to finding God—in the midst of this pandemic. I will offer a traditional approach, a Reconstructionist way, and a mystical path.

First, the Traditional approach. A traditional Jewish theology—although there are many variations—would center on the belief that God is our Creator, directing history and our lives. So even when we don't understand why things happen, we can be assured that events are part of a bigger picture, and that a higher power is in charge. Think about the story of Joseph in the Torah. Joseph goes through so many hardships, being sold into slavery by his own brothers, and put in prison for years due to false accusations. In the end, he becomes a prominent leader in Egypt and tells the very brothers who sold him that everything was part of God's plan.

A Chabad rabbi offered an elegantly produced video early in the pandemic, suggesting that God had sent this plague to the world as a divine blessing in disguise, to give us all an opportunity to turn inward and cultivate our spiritual lives and mitzvot. This approach comforted a lot of traditional Jews, convincing them that what we are going through right now is ultimately for our own good.

Lest you think that only Orthodox Jews think the pandemic came from God, some of my more liberal Jewish friends said almost the same thing as that Chabad rabbi, but in a more feminist, ecological tone. A number of my Renewal colleagues posted on social media the idea that that pandemic is a way for the Shechinah, the motherly Divine Presence that fills the earth, to metaphorically “send us all to our rooms” so that we can contemplate the contemporary evils of climate change and inequality. While this latter description is more organic and modern, it shares the Chabad view that the Divine is somehow purposely inflicting the pandemic on humanity. Only it’s not exactly a punishment. It is more of a second chance, like Joseph’s sojourn in Egypt. Right now, we are unhappy, but down the road, we will hopefully grow and evolve so that we come to see this time of suffering as part of God’s plan for our future.

Every theology has its downside. Here one might ask, how do we presume to know when a disaster is a message from God and when it’s just a natural phenomena? Furthermore, why would a caring God cloak this message with such suffering and death? Couldn’t there be a kinder way to help us grow?

Many Jews who are uncomfortable with such traditional theology are more at home with Reconstructionist Judaism. Reconstructionism is an American Jewish movement of the 20th century, started by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan. Although always a small denomination, it has had an outsized impact on Jewish philosophy and practice. You might be a Reconstructionist and not even know it. Put simply, for Kaplan, God is not an omnipotent supernatural Being controlling everything in the world. God is, instead, “the Power that makes for salvation.” God is a *force* in our lives, not a parent sending us to our rooms. Divinity is more of a verb than a noun. The pandemic and the other challenges of the world are not punishments from God, but evidence that this divine power has not yet fulfilled its ultimate work, a vision of earthly salvation in which we human beings are full partners.

For Reconstructionists, we don’t need to find a supernatural God outside ourselves to explain this natural pandemic. Instead, we find godliness in the courageous and caring acts of people. Every time someone gives of their time to make PPE, or risks their own health to care for another, that is godliness in action.

Every time someone cares for a vulnerable neighbor or makes sure that the hungry are fed, that is an act of “godding,” so to speak.

This humanistic way of seeing Judaism has a lot of appeal for many modern Jews. You don’t have to take a leap of faith to be a Reconstructionist. For Kaplan it was also a deeply spiritual way to understand God, but for others it’s a little too impersonal and intellectual. After all, how do you pray to a verb? How do you have a personal relationship with a power that makes for salvation? You have gained a more rational view of religion, and assumed more responsibility as God’s partner in the world, but maybe lost some of the emotional support of the more traditional beliefs in which God was caring for you even when you suffered.

Third and finally, let’s explore a mystical approach to Jewish theology right now. For mystics (and I often find myself in this camp), religion starts with our lived experience, our personal moments of awe and mystery, which we seek to replicate through spiritual practices such as meditation.

I almost called this sermon, “The Zen of Pandemic,” but then I thought that didn’t sound quite right for a rabbi. Call me a Bu-Jew if you will, but I keep discovering spiritual meaning in the hard lessons of this time. The lessons of meditation, of the High Holy Days, and the pandemic seem to reinforce one another for the mystic. Here are some examples.

A lot of spiritual practice is designed to get us to face our lack of control, vulnerability, and the fragility of life. *Unetaneh Tokef*, that we chant in the High Holy Day Musaf, emphasizes that we don’t know what the future will bring, but we can try to ameliorate our fate with justice and kindness. Of course, the pandemic, too, highlights those very parts of the human condition.

During this pandemic, many of us have clarified our values. Suddenly family and relationships seem much more important than outer success and achievements. Again, this is both a spiritual value—discernment—and a practice of the Days of Awe when we are urged to take an account of our lives, *Heshbon Hanefesh*.

Another universal spiritual lesson is that our actions have consequences. That’s true whether you call it Karma or use the Hebrew term, *midah ke-neged midah*. Once again, this is a lesson inherent in the Days of Awe, that we all have mutual accountability and must take responsibility for what we have done. And seldom in our lifetimes has our personal and national karma stood out in such stark relief as during this pandemic.

To summarize, the pandemic has made our ego shrink, and that makes room for our spirituality to grow. Some of us have been gifted with more solitude and room for spiritual practice, and almost all of us have had to work on patience and staying present when we don't seem to be getting anywhere. "Be here now," says the mystic, for this time is a gift, this is The Present. In mystical meditation we may come to realize that at the heart of our *Ani*, אני, our ego-driven self, there is really nothing but *Ayin*, אין, emptiness. But as we find in deep meditation, and in Kabbalah, that very emptiness is an echo of *Ain Sof*, אין סוף, the formless divine, a universal field of boundless possibility and creativity. Through our spiritual practice, now enhanced by the circumstances of the pandemic time, we might just feel closer to God.

The weakness of the mystical approach is that it can be kind of vague. It's an experience, not an explanation. The rationalist theologian thinks God has to make sense, while for the mystic it is often enough just to sense God. For some, like me, mysticism is beautiful and the way, while for others, it's just too touchy-feely.

Ultimately, there is no one size fits all theology in Judaism. For some, God isn't God unless God is a Being that relates to us personally, directing our destiny. For others of a more humanistic bent, it is fitting to conceive of God as an inner force that motivates us to Tikkun Olam. And for others still, God is an indefinable mystery, sought and encountered through spiritual practice. One or more of these approaches may appeal to you at different times. Whatever your spiritual temperament, Judaism offers a potential path.

The Kotsker Rebbe once asked his followers, "Where does God dwell?" They thought that was an easy question and answered, "Everywhere." "No," responded the Rebbe. "God is wherever you let God in." It is we who choose which God to believe in, which way to make meaning out of suffering. May we find a way to let God—or godliness—or Mystery—into our lives, now in this time, and in the years to come.

Amen.

Breakout Discussion:

Where have you found spiritual connection or meaning in recent months?