

We Americans love to put a label on just about everything. Personally I know this to be true because one of our wedding gifts eight years ago was a label maker. I can tell you we have used the label maker a lot more than say our fine china, but not nearly as much as our fondue set. We have made labels for random keys, spice containers, files, zip drives, even our cat, and so much more. There are times I've even been tempted to put labels on the kids, which is usually around the same time Joy takes the label maker away from me.

On a societal level we like to label everything as well with increasing levels of sophistication. For example, there was a time when one simply ate food without distinction or description. Nowadays one is not a legitimate foodie unless they engage in some sort of dietary specialization. People now label themselves not just carnivores, omnivores, or vegetarians. Oh no. Now you can be a rawist-vegan on a gluten-free, south beach, Atkins approved diet. Though I am waiting with bated breath the day when someone declares themselves a Passoverist, meaning a person who eats only unleavened foods. Though I am sure that trend is coming as soon as someone can find a way to eat only unleavened bread as a way to lose ten pounds in one week. Speaking of which, are there any literary agents in the congregation? I think I've got an idea for a new book.

And if you think those labels are strange enough, don't even get me started on coffee. I know I am not that old, but I do look back with fondness when one could just order a cup of coffee and not a tall Quad Venti Vanilla Latte with mocha half-calf decaf chaser with whip cream on top.

But I think one of the most popular label games in our society is the labeling of generations. There is the generation whose accomplishments have been recounted in books by Tom Brokaw, namely the Greatest Generation, whose members built up this great nation before,

during, and after World War II. There are the baby boomers, which we could also refer to as the atomic generation, who brought us the 60's, tie dye, the Grateful Dead, Hendrix, and the civil rights movement. There is Generation Y also known as the millennials, the net generation, or more derogatively the Peter Pan generation for their delay in transitioning to adulthood.

I happen to belong to a generation labeled Generation X. Generation X is also known as the thirteenth generation whose members were born between 1961 to 1981, though we should note in a strange twist of fate, the term Generation X was actually coined by a British photographer Robert Capa in the 1950's.

However I would argue that instead of calling us Generation X, we should really be the space generation. For it was during the beginnings of our lifetime that man first set foot on the moon. It was my generation who was first captivated as children by the Space Opera and marketing machine known as Star Wars. And for us, our defining moment until 2001 was life before and after the Space Shuttle Challenger Disaster. We didn't just grow up with the dreams of space; we grew up with the reality of space travel.

So it was with much excitement that I recently picked up a book entitled Packing for Mars by Mary Roach. Ms. Roach has a particular fondness for tackling challenging topics from a scientific perspective. Her other books include Stiff: the Curious lives of Human Cadavers, Spook: Science Tackles the Afterlife, and Bonk: The Curious Coupling of Science and Sex. So as you can see, Ms. Roach has a very unique way of engaging in scientific inquiry to say the least.

Packing for Mars explores the one issue that has always confounded Rocket scientists, not the technical difficulties of shooting thousands of pounds of screaming metal into the stratosphere and beyond. No, scientists actually enjoy that part. The challenge for them is the

human animal. As Ms. Roach states, “To the rocket scientist, you are the problem. You are the most irritating piece of machinery he or she will ever have to deal with. You and your fluctuating metabolism, your puny memory, your frame that comes in a million different configurations. You are unpredictable. You’re inconstant. You take weeks to fix ... (but), you are the best thing to happen to rocket science. The human being is the machine that makes the whole endeavor so endlessly intriguing.”<sup>1</sup>

To this end, she goes on to explore the countless issues that had to be tested and tested some more. From sleeping and eating to waste removal, vertigo, space sickness, and the interplay of the two genders on a potential trip to Mars. The book is funny, insightful, and sometimes a wee bit disgusting at times. But all these issues have to be taken into consideration for successful manned space flights. Many of these issues the movie Apollo 13 only hints at.

But there was one area of space exploration Mr. Roach did not spend much time exploring, and that was the sense of awe and wonder attained when human beings first pierced the heavens. She spoke instead about the disorientation many astronauts first feel with their home world so far out of reach. But it does beg the question, when humans left the confines of earth’s pull; they found an environment so foreign everything had to be designed to challenge its very nature. But what they did not find was God.

If you are a believer in an old man with a long white beard sitting on a throne, this mini-exploration of the universe may have been a bit disappointing. Moon rocks were brought back, and pictures have been taken of countless galaxies, the SETI Program has been scanning the skies for radio signals indicating intelligent life in the universe, but there is not a single picture capturing the essence of let alone the profile of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Roach, Mary, Packing For Mars, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 2010, pg. 15.

It has been since the Enlightenment, but even more so since the atomic and space ages that people have not only been doubting the existence of God, but downright proclaiming that God does not exist. I have even been told by some congregants, at another congregation that will not be mentioned, now come on rabbi, you know no one in the congregation really believes in God.

These words made me realize what we need to do, is challenge not necessarily God, but our understanding of life, the universe, everything. So in this time where we are fervently praying to be written and sealed in *Sefer Chayim*, the book of life, I thought it would be worthwhile to spend some time discussing our understanding, our relationship, our connection with the Divine.

To start off with, there is no one universal understanding of God in our tradition. Critics have described the so-called Old Testament as books filled with an angry, wrathful, jealous and sometimes vengeful, Deity. Yes there are times in the Hebrew Bible, the Tanaach, where God is portrayed as angry and vengeful, but there are equally if not more descriptions of God as merciful as well. To this end, the rabbis like to describe God as both the judge and the source of mercy. And it is in this balance, they create the metaphor of us standing before judgment this very day, when the entire world is judged. As the metaphor goes, we seek today to be judged through a lens of leniency and compassion than through the stern gaze of true justice.

More than this, the Bible is filled with countless ways to relate to God. In Genesis, God is the originator, from which everything springs. Even in scientific circles with the first act of creation being the Big Bang, you ask where did the Big Bang come from, and even they get stymied. Now on an aside, our ancient ancestors did not view the world as being created in six twenty four hour periods, known as days to you and me. This is true in part because the sun, the

measure by which we count our days, was not created until day four. Up until that time, we can ask, what is a day to God? Is it twenty four hours? Is it a year? Is it a billion years? Is it the age of the universe or beyond? All that our tradition seems to be telling us is that it all originates from God.

So there is a consistent belief that all emanates from God. But from that point on, everything diverges. We find in our text at times human descriptions of God, like God's feet walking the Garden of Eden, or Moses seeing the back of God. We also find in our tradition the idea of *Ein Sof* from the Kabbalists that the true essence of God is unknowable and the only part of God we can hope to encounter is the *Shechina*, God's loving presence.

There are those who describe God as being affected by the sacrifices of our ancient ancestors especially throughout the book of Leviticus. The prophets however say without just deeds, all these sacrifices are meaningless. In Deuteronomy, God only really cares if we act in compassionate ways to set up a just and righteous society. And don't even get me started on the Book of Job.

So if our ancient ancestors wrestled with God in our Sacred Scriptures, why can't we do the same?

There is a wonderful speech in a movie by one of my favorite filmmakers Kevin Smith. In his movie Dogma which was about two fallen angels played by a much younger Ben Affleck and Matt Damon who are trying to get back to heaven. But to do this, they have to destroy the last scion played by Linda Fiorentino who also appeared in Men in Black. Now before you race out to rent it, I should mention the film is laden with profanity and violence. Though now that I think about it, I am not sure if that previous statement is a warning or an endorsement. Oh well. Getting back to the movie, in Dogma, a Jewish friend of the main character describes what it

means to believe, based on her own encounters, “He said that faith is like a glass of water. When you're young, the glass is small, and it's easy to fill up. But the older you get, the bigger the glass gets, and the same amount of liquid doesn't fill it anymore. Periodically, the glass has to be refilled.”

I think this quote sums up the challenges of our circumstance in many ways. Many of us are here with an image of God we were either given or have gathered unto ourselves since childhood. It is usually a metaphor that compares God to a loving, but stern parent who supports us when we have fallen, and punishes those who have sinned. It is a great metaphor until it breaks down under the scrutiny of modern circumstance. There are times where it feels like God is not there to lift us up, and we see instead only pain, suffering, and prosperity of the wicked. Thus we need something else to fill up our glass.

So if the metaphor doesn't work, what can we do? Some have chosen simply to renounce God. That is their choice. My only issue is what have they replaced it with. With authors like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, they appear to have replaced God with anger against those who believe in God. Not a very comforting or fulfilling perspective to say the least. They go on to argue humanity created God or at least uses God to justify their own horrific acts.

In order to find a new metaphor, a new understanding, perhaps then we should start with our own nature and what it means to be created *b'tzelem Elohim*, in the image of God. When debating this central concept, the rabbis generally agree it refers to what is in our souls rather than our physical makeup. They go on to argue that we represent the embodiment of God rather than having being built according to God's physical attributes.

If this is indeed the case, what does it all mean? In a Torah commentary Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev said, “in Psalms we read, ‘God is your shelter (*Adonai tzilcha*)’ (Psalm

121:5).” Reb Yitzhak goes on to explain, “Shelter (*tzilcha*) may be read as ‘shade’ or shadow.’ For whatever a person does, the shadow does after them, according to their actions.”<sup>2</sup>

What Reb Levi is doing is providing us with a new metaphor for here he is teaching us that God in many ways shadows or is the shadow of human action. Or to put it another way, as expressed by Rabbi Brent Chaim Spodek and Ruth Messinger on their commentary on *Un'taneh Tokef*, “If we save a human life, so too does God; if we decide to end a human life, God does also. At some level, the utterly transcendent divinity is right at hand, for the divinity we hope to worship is a shadow of ourselves, our best parts and our worst. If you want to see God save the innocent, you need to get off the couch and save the innocent. If you want to see God feed the hungry, you need to feed the hungry. If you want to see God stand by while the innocent suffer, all you need to do is stand by and do nothing yourself.”<sup>3</sup>

This metaphor in turn creates a whole new meaning for these High Holy Days and especially for this Yom Kippur. According to these interpretations, what we choose to do is a representation of our understanding of what God wants from us, and more than that, our very actions determine how God acts in this world. Talk about an awesome responsibility in every sense of the word.

So maybe instead of spending our time in *shul* wondering if God is impacted by our prayers, or if there is even a God; we should focus instead on choosing to impact God through our prayers. Prayers in this sense become the vehicles to inspire us to action, and it is through our actions we have the ability to repair the world.

And that truly is the heart of these *Yamim Noraim*, to get us back on the path of holiness even when we have strayed. For every sacred choice, every righteous deed we have failed to do,

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<sup>2</sup> Kedushat Levi Parashat Metzora

<sup>3</sup> *Who by Fire, Who by Water*, ed. Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman, Woodstock, Jewish Lights, 2010, 223-224.

removes a piece of the Divine from our existence, but just as true, every sacred choice, every righteous deed we have done this year, brings our shadow, by definition a trace: an indication that something has been present, a little closer to actually being real and not simply ethereal.

If we want to find God, if we want to know God, it takes more than faith, it takes more than dreams, it takes each of us acting in accordance with our understanding of tradition, to bring the Holy to reality. To borrow from Mary Roach, “it is the human being’s pursuit of the Divine that makes the whole endeavor so endlessly intriguing.” A task demanded of each and every one of us in each and every generation no matter the labels.

L’shana Tova