

Dec. 15, 1989 God in this place: entrances to holiness Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

“Dear God, are you real? Some people don’t believe. If you are, you better do something quick. signed Harriet Ann.” Harriet is not a prophet nor a sage, just a little girl who has lots of questions about God. So does another boy whose letter is included in the book, Children’s Letter to God. No doubt, he had been told many things about God, but so much remains unclear. Our little friend writes directly to the Divine Source: “Dear Mister God. How do you feel about people who don’t believe in You? Somebody else wants to know. A friend, signed Neal.” Harriet Ann and Neal and you and I, we are all looking for God. We wait for an answer to our prayers, from our churches, our schools, from the depth of theology.

Do you remember our father Jacob? Jacob, who also searched for God but not knowing how to proceed, he was unable to find God. Like us, Jacob dreamt. He wondered. Overwhelmed by his active life, however, he had simply forgotten how to look for God. He had practically given up the search when on that fateful night, asleep in the lonely wilderness, Jacob was shaken from that deep sleep and from his own spiritual complacency. Awakened by a haunting vision, his body shaking, Jacob cried out in anguish “Surely God is in this place, but I did not know it!” “God was here – the understanding that I have always wanted – but I was unable to feel, unable to ascend the ladder.” Jacob shook his fist at the air, angry with himself: “I should have had that moment – it was mine, I deserved it. The Lord approached me, spoke to me, gave me promise and hope – and where was I – sleeping!” At that moment Jacob realized not only what he missed, but why it had continued to allude him; our fellow seeker lowered his head, softened his voice, and in deepest pain understood: “Surely God is in this place, but I did not now it!”

What great pathos we feel in the patriarch’s cry of anguish! God had been so close if only Jacob had been aware. How deeply we feel Jacob’s despair for his failure. It was a lifetime opportunity!

Like Jacob, and like our young friends, Harriet, and Neal, we have so many questions about God, even if we have ceased to ask them. As adults, our questions, do not take the form of cute letters to God. Instead, we make an elaborate attempt to develop a coherent personal theology. But whether it’s the child’s letter or the adult’s theology, it’s all the same – our questions about God are never really answered in a satisfying manner. Feeling frustrated, soon we discover that we are no longer asking the questions. God may very well be in this place – but we do not know it – for like Jacob we have become spiritually insensitive and callous.

Perhaps the best way to understand our myopia is to assess the ways in which we first learn about God when we are young. Our textbooks, our teachers, and even our well-meaning parents, try to answer our questions; first they explain God to us in concrete terms, for they fear that young children can understand nothing else. They may describe God as a wise, old, white bearded figure, perhaps not a man, but masculine in many ways. Thus, many children learn to think about God as a person, wondering about God's eyes or hair, or clothes. They are trained in that spiritual near-sightedness -- to look for a God that is physically something like us. These anthropomorphic descriptions may well make it easier for the adults who awkwardly try to explain God, but for the child these descriptions only limit spiritual comprehension and growth.

And then we – teachers and parents – try to compensate for that human likeness in which we portray God by telling our children that God can do more than humans – that God can see everything, hear everything, know everything – even the things we think but never say. We explain that there are no secrets from this super-human-like God. Inadvertently, we foster feelings of guilt and anxiety. Intending to portray God's greatness, we create an image of God who will punish the child for natural, but negative thoughts about baby brother or disciplining parents. In our well-meaning attempt to elevate God in greatness, we make the Divine so unreachable and unreasonable, that our children are seized by fear and hesitancy that ends their spiritual search.

Then, stifling our children's impulse to search for the Divine, even more we teach that God can do anything and everything. We set up the highest expectations about God's unlimited power, but we never prepare our children for the eventual disappointment when their prayers are not answered. One discontented child writes to God admonishingly, "Dear God, I wrote You before, do you remember? Well, I did what I promised. But You did not send me the horse, yet. What about it? -- signed Henry."

Unrealistic expectations, and materially oriented prayers, can lead only to a disappointment that dims our children's awareness of God and diminishes their desire to continue the search.

Our lessons about the perfect, omnipotent deity, teach our children to blame God for all in our world that isn't perfect. We foster in them a sense of anger as we hear in this letter from a little boy: "Dear God, if You know so much, how come You never made the river big enough for all the water, and our house got flooded, and now we've got to move? signed Victor."

As the child in each of us matured, we outgrew the anthropomorphic picture of the Divine. Having outgrown this infantile god, with many questions still unanswered, we diminish our search, until one day we discover that we are

no longer asking questions. God may very well be in this place, but we don't know it, for like Jacob, we have become spiritually blind.

But then, one day we are awakened from our spiritual slumber, often in a most unexpected way. Like Jacob, something seems to jolt us from our quiet ways; we begin to understand that, indeed, God is in this place, in us and in our lives! We realize that in our once desperate attempt to run after God, we have run away from what has been present within us all our lives.

Our difficulties with a spiritual search come from the fact that some of us look for God only in theologies and books, in what others have said about God. We want to learn about the Divine in the same way we learn about any mere object. For many, it is a difficult realization that such a search is unproductive. We must learn to recognize, as did our teacher, Jacob, that the gateway to God is in this place – in our hearts and in our lives. Our existence is overflowing with abundant opportunities for holiness. Not in the magical or supernatural, but in the common place of nature, of self, of human trial and doubt should we look to find God.

To begin with our search for God, we need to teach our children that the initial experience with God is the experience of the universe about us. We should sing with them the songs of Isaiah about “the arid desert shall be glad, the wilderness shall rejoice and shall blossom like a rose.” We should have the ability to marvel at the words of the Psalmist who wrote: “God causes streams to spring forth in the valleys. Streams run between the mountains, giving drink to all the beasts of the field. The birds of the air nest on the banks and sing among the leaves.” However, they should learn that being touched by God is not only a matter of beautiful sights and special places, but of the ability to marvel at the commonplace: “In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the glass.”

We should teach our children that standing before God is not a result of where you stand, but of how you stand. We need to teach our children to have values. Values give life moral purpose. We can help children to understand the notion of God by having them see God in people's lives as an opportunity to live righteously. This can create “an inventory of divine values.” When is God experienced? When a person engages in prayer or gives charity, or comforts a friend, or visits the sick; when a person learns or teaches; or accepts new responsibilities or recognized his own personal growth. In doing so, the child learns to recognize those unique feelings that are present in encounters with the Divine; the child is more aware of goodness, of love, of warmth, of giving, of challenge, of courage, so that he remembers those moments, repeats them, and weaves them into the pattern of his own life. Only with this awareness does the

child cease to make God human, and instead attempt to make himself more God-like. Then the child will understand that God can be found as part of life, to be recognized in the moment. Then he might never echo the words of Jacob, "God was there, but he knew it not."

We must teach our children also to accept doubt. Doubts prod us to grow – to extend the limits of our capability. We must teach that only in the child's own personal experience can God be met, and not in the experience of others. We must avoid any idea of God that can not grow with them as their own changing needs demand new spiritual responses. We should make it clear to our children that none of us are experts. None of us have the ultimate answers. Even more than providing different answers, perhaps our greatest service would be to offer those children different questions. All have important questions which we need to continue asking if we are to undertake the personal search for the various entrances to holiness. Once past the entrances the experiences of our attempts to make ourselves more God-like will lead us to exclaim: "Surely God is in this place!"

You know if I could write those many children who have written letters to God because they had unanswered questions, I would write: "Dear Harriet and Neal, Herbie, and Henry, and Victor, you ask many wonderful questions. It's extremely hard to understand God, especially when you ask other people, and no one seems to really have answers to your questions. Yet, you want to feel that God is in your life. So, keep on looking for God, yourself, just like the rest of us do. Only don't wait too long. Open your minds in a special way. Good Luck. Your friend, Aryeh."