

Jan. 25

February 18, 1991     A Word to the Closet Believer     Rabbi Aryeh Azriel

Rabbi Zalman once asked a disciple: "Moshe, what do we mean when we say 'God'?" The disciple was silent. The Rabbi asked a second, a third time, still silence. Finally, Rabbi Zalman demanded: "Why are you silent?" The disciple spoke: "Because I do not know." The Rabbi responded: "Do you think I know and yet, I must say God. I must tell stories of God and speak prayers to God."

We gather here on this Shabbat moment in our weekly calendar. We speak of God and to God. If asked, what do we mean when we say God, we too may be silent and, if pressed, confess we do not know for sure what we mean. We haven't thought it through and if we do – it is still a mystery. And yet, we too feel it is fitting, at least tonight, to come together with other Jews and speak a different kind of language, the language of prayer.

When I was growing up, I lived in two worlds. There was the self I revealed to others. In that outer world I learned to use my critical mind, to debate issues and try to persuade by logic. In my outer world I sought to master the skills of the classroom and the playing field. (And I combated my pompadour to appeal to the opposite sex.)

And there was an inner me who believed in God. Periodically, I prayed to God, but I did not speak of my God to anyone. My parents never spoke to me of God, though when my mother fasted on Yom Kippur there was a hint of relation to a mysterious other.

When we went infrequently to synagogue, the prayers we recited seemed more like something you ought to do because you were a Jew, rather conscious communication with God. The Rabbi never or almost never spoke about faith or his faith in God.

My belief in God was a very private, personal part of my inner life. I was a closet believer as are some of you. Internally we affirm some belief in a creative, guiding, helping presence greater than ourselves. In critical moments we pray, but we don't feel comfortable speaking of such matters to others, not even to our children.

Why? Why are we so reticent? Partly because we don't want to appear too religious. That's weird. We are suspicious of those who are too chummy with God, who

speaks as if God is dictating everything they should do with a loud, clear baritone voice resembling Charlton Heston's.

I think that there is an even greater reason for our reticence about God. We have been taught to respect as real or true only what can be proven in a laboratory or publicly and rationally demonstrated to the satisfaction of every sensible human being. We Jews pride ourselves on being supremely rational beings. God does not submit to such a test and we are embarrassed to publicly proclaim what cannot be proven.

Even Rabbis are tempted to remain closet believers. I confess in my earlier years as a Rabbi, I often succumbed to that temptation. I prided myself on being a rational, sophisticated person and was a bit embarrassed by that part of me that clung to faith in God. In those earlier years, I rarely preached about God. I have long since come out of the closet.

When we are closet believers, our relation to God is in some respects like our relation to dreams. Most of us dream. Dreams are the stories of our unconscious mind. We don't control our dream life. Dreams can be very strange, bewildering, sometimes wonderful, sometimes frightening. We tend to ignore our dream life, to repress it, in order to focus on our conscious mental and physical activity in the world. And yet, being fully human means opening our conscious selves to the images, the symbols, and the messages from the world of our dreams. And yes, being fully human means opening our conscious lives to the presence of God.

How do we overcome our resistance? First, by understanding that life presents us with different kinds of questions. There are questions that can be answered by the chemist and the astronomer using the methods of science, and there are other kinds of questions.

Many years ago, during my second year of college, I rushed for a bus with a pile of books under my arm. The weather was frigid. My exertion was enormous. I ran and ran and ran. I was determined to get that bus. I made it. I entered the bus and collapsed on a seat. And suddenly, for a moment, the normal structure of my world collapsed also. My very existence and that of the world around me was called into question. Why was I here or anywhere? Why was I? Why was I doing what I was doing and what sense did it all make?

It was as if I was momentarily confronted with cosmic chaos or nothingness. At that moment, I could only take nothing for granted. It was a very threatening moment. Then, much to my relief it passed. My sense of the order of Being returned, and silently and gratefully I found myself affirming the Source of Being.

Why is there anything? Why are we here? What is the purpose and meaning of our lives? These are not scientific questions. They cannot be answered by pure reason or experiment. They are religious questions. The answers are given in personal religious experiences and stories found in the Torah, stories on which our prayers are based. How does such a story come to us?

Through great artists of the spirit, through men and women whose souls were especially attuned to the Eternal One. The story may have been communicated in dreams and it is preserved in the Torah and in the stories and the prayers we recite. We cannot prove the story as scientific theory. And all the signs, even the most dramatic ones that point to God's presence in our lives, still require that special ingredient we call faith.

I remember a conversation with a bright, sophisticated, and intellectual woman. For many years she has been struggling with the issue of God and spirituality. She often wants to be more religious than her rational and critical mind will permit. With deepest feeling she shared this experience.

She was at a lovely resort at a turning point in her own career and she needed some assurance, some signs that she was making the right decision and could handle the new challenge without placing too much stress on herself or on her marriage. She also had a desire to find a perfect shell. As she was walking along the shore anxiously pondering her future, a seagull flew by. In its beak a perfect shell which it deposited quite near her. She gasped, and then smiled. Was this the sign she had been seeking?

We don't usually depend upon or receive such dramatic signs, and when they occur, we can always dismiss them as coincidence, and we often do. She did not. She called it an epiphany, a revelation. Usually, the signs are much more subtle and ambiguous, at least in my life. Elijah the prophet experienced God most profoundly not in the earthquake or the fire, but in the voice of gentle stillness, the sound of silence.

There are times when the sights and sounds of this world yield a sign of God's presence if we are truly present. My first encounter with my daughter in the delivery room, after her birth, was such a moment. Watching the heavens in Jerusalem on a dark, star-studded night is at times such a moment.

Sometimes I will puzzle out a problem or search for an idea. I have done all the legwork, all the research, but nothing comes, or my mind is blank or confusion reigns. And then, when I least expect it and am on the other tings, the idea forms. Such inspiration is a gift. At such moments I know what the Rabbis mean when they say: "Praised be thou, O Lord, Giver of knowledge."

When we are totally preoccupied with our own agenda, thinking of what we have missed or do not have or have not become, sometimes, in the midst of our narcissistic reverie some may express their need of us, the need for a word, a listening ear, a responsive heart, a helpful deed; and in responding to them sometimes we feel we are in harmony with the true purpose of our lives. In responding to them we are responding to the Eternal One.

There are times when I have felt trapped by the circumstances of life, no exit, no solution, no escape, fearing the worst – only to discover, much to my amazement and gratitude, the alternatives appear, new possibilities, and I have found new meaning in the words " O Lord, Redeemer of Israel."

And yes, there are a few times in my life when I have been close to despair and seriously wondered if life is worth the trouble, and I have been surprised by a touch of grace; sometimes an event that restored hope or just the amazing renewal of my power to carry on. At such moments, I have been newly aware of the One who is in the Source of our "courage to be."

Have there not been such moments in all of our lives? The religious story we pray tonight, the story of a God who creates and guides and redeems is at times experience in our lives. But such experiences may remain part of our secret selves, in the closet, repressed like the stirrings of our unconscious minds.

Like Rabbi Zalman, I do not know what I mean by God because God is deeper and greater than what my mind can envision or comprehend. God does not submit to a reliable public demonstration of power and presence. The signs are subtle and require faith.

We Jews are an interesting people. As a community we have overdeveloped our practical critical minds. We are bright and clever and enterprising and often caring and responsible. But we modern Jews are too often alienated from that part of our being. So many of us at best have been closet believers who do not permit ourselves to admit to others, or even to ourselves, that there is a religious spark in our souls.

What is at stake in our paying more attention to the religious dimension? It will not affect our stock on Wall Street or even guarantee peace of mind. What will it give? For one thing a release from a certain shallowness. Those who ignore or suppress or depreciate religious questions are impoverished thereby. That intolerant of mystery, who glibly label themselves agnostics or non-believers and then go on to other things, those who are not bothered by their non-belief, such persons lack a dimension of inner depth.

Do we really want ourselves or our children to be perfect little factualists and information assimilators with no reverence or interest in what lies beyond the material, the tangible, and the measurable? Do we want them to ignore such questions as: Why am I here? Why are there a right and a wrong? Why can I hope?

On this night of Shabbat let us resolve to be more in touch with that other part of our being. Let us learn to see more than children's tales of innocent fictions in the prayers that we recite, but words that respond to the most important questions of life, words which address the yearning, the limitations, and the experiences of our secret selves. Tonight, before we leave this place, may we recover a sense of our true place in this world and may we be blessed with a new awareness that beyond the mystery there is meaning.