

Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan called Judaism a “religious civilization.” He meant that while religion is at the core of our Jewishness, Judaism embraces an entire culture, expanding beyond religion.

“What Can We Know About God?”

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This morning I would like to speak on a theme which is rarely spoken of in the Conservative synagogue. It is talked round, assumed, alluded to, at the core of all that we do and feel here, but rarely discussed in depth.

That theme is God.

So what shall we say of God? Where can we go to learn anything which will help us in our search? My teacher, Rabbi Robert Gordis, extracted from our Bible four principles regarding God which are shaped in the shadow of tragedies as morally outrageous as the death of the Six Million .

The first is that God, who is the author of life, makes life worthwhile. That is why we recite God in our Mahzor “*Zochrenu L’Hayim*” – “Remember us for life.” But I can sense you responding in your mind, “Prove it to me, Rabbi. Prove to me that my life is really worthwhile living at all. Why should I accept without evidence this first principle of our Bible?” Did not the schools of Hillel and Shammai debate for two and one-half years the question of whether it was worth being born, concluding that it was not, but that we should make the best of it? I must confess to being unable to prove the worthwhileness of life. But neither can anyone prove that it is not worthwhile. Rabbi Milton Steinberg put it this way: “Given a proposition and its opposite, neither really provable, we should gamble on opting for the one which makes the most sense of our lives. That life is good because it flows from God is a gamble. But it is a gamble which pays off in giving the most meaning to our years. Many of our most frequent actions and meaningful activities are similarly ‘gamble of assumptions.’ That the sun will rise tomorrow, that this building will not fall on our heads, that our spouse will continue to love us.”

The second principle of God which we learn from our Bible is that God not only comforts us. God makes demands of us. Last year I surveyed our Bar Mitzvah students to find out what images were brought to

their minds by the word “God.” Almost without exception their responses were of the kind: “Something hovering up there, protective clouds, warmth.” What these students were saying was that their most responsive image of God was of a God who protects, delivers and fathers us. Indeed, this is part of the Jewish idea of God . . . “Our father, our King.” The extreme of this is that God is some sort of “cosmic bellhop,” on call to intervene miraculously and save us from the fruits of our own folly, on call to invoke the American way of life as against the Soviets, on call to sanctify the superiority of white over black, capitalist over socialist, liberal over conservative.

What is indeed the larger meaning of the binding of Isaac in the Akedah? It is that God is the source of values which demand that we each reach levels which are so far beyond us that it hurts. God is not only a loving sanctifier. God is a stubborn demander.

In this sense, I suggest that the word *mitzvah* in Hebrew be seen not only as “commandment” but also as “expectation.” The second principle inherent in our Bible is that God is the source in our universe of great expectations.

One of the awesome duties and privileges of being a rabbi is that of being invited to the most significant, crucial and intimate moments of those whom one serves. A frequent question at times like this – and it is asked not only in words but through silence too – “Why – why did this happen to us? Why did this accident occur and these lovely people become mangled? Why is my child not what I hoped he would be? Why do I have all the creature comforts, but lack the marriage that I dreamed of under the canopy? Why is there so much cruelty and suffering if we say that God and his world are good?”

These questions emerging from our lives lead me to the answer, which is the third principle which we can know of God from our Bible. If you study the Bible carefully you will see that it offers many responses to the question of personal and collective tragedy: Suffering is sometimes a blessing in disguise. Suffering teaches us many lessons which in effect cleanse us. Evil, which appears to triumph in the short run, frequently loses out in the long run. Yet, the Book of Job rejects all of these earlier explanations. Job systematically

rejects each one and argues that no matter what answers we conjure up, the essence of evil will always elude us and be a mystery. Are we then powerless? Not really. Even though the essence of evil is mystery, our duty as humans who believe in God is not to accept that which is bad in the world, but to resist and overcome it.

How many times have we thought in the face of our own tragedy: “It is God’s will, I shall accept it?” But that fatalistic acceptance is not the posture that our Bible urges upon us. Do you recall the name given to the Kaddish of Levi Yitzhak Berdichev of the eighteenth century? *Din Torah Mit Gott* . . . civil case against God. He learned that arrogance from Job, who learned it from the original “*Chutzadik*” of all, Abraham. Far from unflinchingly accepting the will of God, Abraham leveled his own civil suit in the case of Sodom, “If you are so righteous and the world so good, God, then why don’t you act righteously?” The popular notion that it is our duty to accept unflinchingly that which befalls us in life and meekly declare, “It is God’s will,” is foreign to Judaism. Our Bible counsels those who believe in God to act far differently.

Which leads me to principle number four. How convenient and easy it is to throw our lives into the hands of God and claim that what befalls us is His destiny and in His control! One need not be religious to take this view, for even non-religious people take refuge in this kind of theological security blanket. How are we to explain in our own day the unprecedented devotion to astrology? Department stores cannot stock up quickly enough on tarot cards. For one thousand dollars one can even join Pan American’s new Psychic tour of Great Britain. Each tourist receives his astronumerology chart and flight dates are astrologically plotted to be favorable. Those of us who believe in God may chuckle, but we too subscribe to the same philosophy of destiny when we cry “*besherit*” – it is our destiny decreed by God. Listen to the comments on this kind of fatalistic thinking by a famous pious Jew. A believer in the living God of Judaism, a seminal Jewish thinker, Moses Maimonides said, “Each one of us is provided with the free choice between good and evil; man is unique in that he alone among all creatures can distinguish between good and evil . . . do not be persuaded by that which fools assert . . . that God decrees from the birth of man the course of his life . . . each man can be as righteous as Moshe Rabbeinu or as evil as Yeroboam.” That is to say, God does not determine our destinies.

Maimonides learned this attitude not from reading astrological charts or claiming “*besheret*,” a popular but inauthentic and foreign attitude which found its way into Judaism, but from authentic Jewish sources, like the Torah. The Torah considers the principle of our own freedom to choose the course of our lives so paramount that three times in Deuteronomy it declares our right to undestined lives: “Behold I place before you this day the blessing and the curse, life and death, choose life . . .”

The old psychiatry told us that our lives are destined by factors we cannot control. The new psychiatry says what you and I do may indeed be influenced by factors beyond our control: distant events of youth, large events of society, God’s will in the world. New psychiatry contends that a wide margin of free will exists, that we can analyze and alter those components which make us act as we do. The essence of God acting in the world, according to Judaism is not to determine our lives, but to provide us with free will so that we select the course of our lives, and bear its consequences, good or bad.

As we have this freedom of choice, we can choose evil as well as good. And here we return for a moment to that vexing problem of why a good God allows bad things to happen. Even though, as I said, the core of that question is a mystery, there is much around that core which is clear. Many of the major ills of our lives are not the will of God but the bitter by-product of human choice and actions: The suffering when a plane goes down is tragic, but we have chosen to gamble the risks involved. The collapse of a hotel on innocent people is unbearable but it is not God who has determined it, but man, who has failed to stop it. The child who does not turn out as we wish, is not God’s punishment visited upon us, or our destiny, but the result of a multiplicity of factors which influence that child.

A young boy concluded his bedtime prayer “And O Yes, dear God, please take care of Yourself, because if anything happens to You, we’re all sunk.” These are three four essential principles of God, as taught by our Bible, in the crew of Rabbi Robert Gordis. We are sunk as a religion and sunk as individuals if what we do here is minus God, because what our religion instructs us regarding God makes a difference as to how we live our daily lives.

