

It's a Metaphor

Some years ago a family came to see me.

Their daughter didn't want to have a bat mitzvah and she and her parents had reached an impasse. So they came to see the rabbi.

"Tell me why you don't want to celebrate your bat mitzvah," I asked.

The girl's answer: "I don't believe in the Jewish God".

"Oh? Tell me about the Jewish God you don't believe in."

"You know, the one I read about in the prayerbook on the high holidays.

The king who is always judging us, you know, for sinning."

Gulp. I took a deep breath and tried to figure out where to begin.

I understood how she got a negative idea about "the Jewish God."

And I understand how others could similarly get the idea that the "Jewish God" is harsh and punishing and judgmental if their theology was informed only by a cursory reading of the high holyday prayers.

God forbid, someone should come here on Yom Kippur and walk away saying, I don't want to have anything to do with Judaism because of that God.

So, I'd like to speak tonight about God as Judge,
how we can relate to this metaphor in our Machzor,
and what I think it really means.

The idea of God judging us and writing us in the Book of Life started around 2000 years ago with rabbis of the Mishnah. (Rosh Hashanah 1:2)

They taught that the world is judged four times each year:

On Passover, for grain; on Shavuot, for fruit; on Sukkot, for water;

and on Rosh Hashanah, all of the inhabitants of the world are judged.

We have to remember that when the Sages talk about God as a judge,

it's a *metaphor*, and there are many varying metaphors

that the sages use to try to describe God,

just like the Torah, the prophets, the poets who wrote our liturgy,

all use metaphors to try to speak to that which is beyond all words.

God as Warrior, God as Light, God as Shepherd, God as Shield.

Metaphors are not meant to be taken literally.

When someone says, "You are my sunshine," you aren't really the sunshine!

but it's a metaphor, used to express an idea, a feeling.

For the writers of the high holyday prayers over the next thousand years, the metaphor of God as Judge resonated for them, and they continued to compose prayers that made their way into our Machzor. They wrote poems like:

Avinu Malkenu: write us in the book of good life

L'El Orech Din: you, Judge, probe all hearts on the Day of Judgment

or *Unetaneh Tokef*: You are the Judge, opening the books, and

On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed.

They wrote these prayers

because the metaphor of judge spoke to them -

it was a powerful way to express the notion of human responsibility and teshuva, repenting and correcting our ways,

just as the metaphor of king spoke to them:

they lived under kings, kings with a lot of power:
a king was the most powerful image they could think of.

Interestingly, there were other rabbinic metaphors for God that the poets of the Machzor didn't pick up on – for example,

The Mishnah about Yom Kippur from 2000 years ago (Yoma 8:9)

Imagines God as water, as a mikveh,

water that we immerse in to purify ourselves: It says:

“Mikveh Yisrael Hashem, that is, God is the mikveh of Israel.”

Just as a mikveh purifies the impure,
so does the Holy Blessed One purify Israel.”

What if the poets of the prayerbook had picked up on this metaphor?

Instead of singing Avinu Malkenu, Our Father Our King,

we might be saying: “Our River, Our Ocean, wash away our mistakes.”

“Our River, Our Ocean, purify our hearts, wash away our grudges.”

There's another metaphor also in this same Mishnah:

it refers to God as HaMakom, the Place.

What if our tradition had focused on that metaphor instead?

Instead of God being a distant, powerful being up there on a throne,

what if God was the Place, the place where we are,

the place where we come together, the place where we pay attention and open our hearts and try to make our lives and the world better?

But these are just metaphors too.

The Israelite religion of the Torah sought to wipe out idolatry.

It's right in the Ten Commandments:

Don't make a sculptured image or a likeness of God.

It's the big no-no of the bible.

But metaphors can turn into idolatry too,

if they create fixed images in our minds.

Words and concepts can create a sculptured image.

God is of course beyond all words and images and metaphors,

But the problem is: we're human, and all we have are words to try to express the ineffable, so we do the best we can.

But we have to remember that they are metaphors,

poetry, words expressed by our ancestors to try to capture

a feeling of something that cannot be captured.

Prayer isn't a statement of verifiable, objective facts;

it's stepping into the poetic imagination of our sages and

liturgists from centuries ago.

Many of our thinkers over the centuries

have attempted to smash the idols of our ancestors,

just like Abraham smashed his father's idols in the old story.

Maimonides in the 12th Century asserted a “negative theology,”

the idea that you can't say anything about God,

you can only say what God isn't.

Mystics throughout the centuries have related to God as *Havaya*, Existence or Being, asserting that One God means: God is ALL there is.

Modern theologians have suggested that describing God as a noun altogether is the problem, and that we should think of God as a verb, a gerund, an adverb, a process. God isn't a thing but godliness is a way of being.

But the poets of the Machzor imagined God as judge. That is the metaphor for these days, which for many Jews, is the main time we encounter "The Jewish God" – it certainly was for me growing up. Going to synagogue twice a year on the High Holydays, I didn't much encounter Judaism's other metaphors for God: On Sukkot, God is our shelter. On Pesach, God is our liberator. On Shavuot, God is the giver of Torah. On Purim, we just have a wacky good time and don't even mention God. It's fascinating to me how many Jews come to synagogue for the high holydays when the metaphors are so much more challenging than they are for other holidays. But here you are with this God of the machzor, and it's my job to be your docent, to interpret this work of art, especially for that bat mitzvah girl who says: I don't believe in the Jewish God.

Here's why I think the metaphor of the Judging God is so potentially damaging and in need of some interpretation.

It touches our most painful religious questions and fears:
If God really is the Judge, then why is there no Justice in our world?
If God really is the Judge, then when we suffer, we ask:
why is God punishing me?
If God really is the Judge, then how can we find comfort in God when tragedy strikes innocent, good people?

I understand why the bat mitzvah girl would say I don't believe in the Jewish God, if her only exposure was to God the Judge.
I understand why the Talmud sage, Elisha Ben Abuya left Judaism –
The Talmud tells his story:
He saw a boy fulfilling the exact two mitzvot for which the Torah promises the reward of a long life:
Shooing away the mother bird before taking her young and
Honoring your parents.
Do these two, the Torah says: and you'll be rewarded with long life.
The boy's father told him to climb a ladder and shoo away the mother bird, and the boy did so, and he honored his father's instruction,
and - he fell off the ladder and died.
With that Elisha Ben Abuya declared, *Leit Din v'Leit Dayan*,
"there is no justice and there is no Judge," and he left Judaism.

When we take the metaphor of God the Judge literally,
we end up with a painful theology;
it's the theology of Elisha Ben Abuya who abandons his Judaism;

the theology of a truth-seeking young girl who in her integrity
refuses to become bat mitzvah;
it's the theology of a scared cancer patient who asks
"why is God doing this to me?"

Believe it or not, the metaphors we use for God have been studied
by neuroscientists for the effects they have on our brains.

Dr. Andrew Newberg, in his book How God Changes Your Brain,
reports on brain scans that show how different parts of our brain
light up with neural activity depending on
what concepts of God are activated.

When we conceive of an authoritarian or critical God,
the limbic system in our brain is activated.
That's the older, more primitive, reptilian part of our brain
where anger, fear, and anxiety reside.

On the other hand, when we experience a loving and compassionate God,
a different part of our brain is activated called the anterior cingulate.
Not surprisingly, the anterior cingulate is where
compassion, tolerance, and empathy reside.
Evolutionarily speaking, the anterior cingulate is a newer part of our brain.
Our brains are evolving, and our God metaphors are evolving too.
Newberg brings research that prayer and meditation increase activity in the anterior cingulate,
which can actually change the brain and make us more loving and compassionate people.

But the more primitive limbic system,
which is activated by notions of a punishing God
is the location of our "fight or flight" response.
No wonder the bat mitzvah girl resisted her parents, and
Elisha Ben Abuyah ran away from Judaism.
The god of the reptilian limbic system makes us want to choose
fight or flight.

So what do we do with the metaphor of God the Judge in our prayerbook?
First, hopefully, I've already convinced you that it's a metaphor not to be taken literally and that
our metaphors are evolving with us.
But it's also a metaphor that has endured for 2000 years because it actually does express
something necessary:
We need judgment.
Judgment has gotten a bad rap because
we associate it with being judgmental, severe, harsh.
But what if we called it instead:
Introspection, self-examination, growth and transformation?
The Hebrew word "to pray," *lehitpalel*, literally means to judge yourself.
We need the metaphor of Judge during these holidays to motivate us to look at our lives, our
relationships, our behaviors and
to make ourselves better, to make amends, to rectify our wrongs.

So often, this is our version of the Ashamnu prayer:
ai ai ai ai ai ai

Not my fault
 It wasn't me
 It wasn't so bad
 He deserved it
 ai ai ai ai ai ai ai
 Everyone was doing it
 It didn't really hurt anybody
 Get over it already
 You're too sensitive
 ai ai ai ai ai ai ai

God the Judge is a metaphor that means:
 do an honest accounting of your soul, take responsibility,
 change what needs to be changed.
 And this is as true now as it was 2000 years ago when our ancestors first used the metaphor of
 God as Judge.
 God the Judge is certainly not the only metaphor in Judaism
 And it is spiritually dangerous if we take it too literally,
 But for ten days a year, from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur,
 we need the metaphor of God the Judge
 to take an honest look at ourselves,
 to improve our lives and our world.
 Let's be honest. Look around at our world.
 There's plenty of room for improvement.
 Refugees. Climate change. Gun violence. Racism.
 We've made a mess of our world.
 Or bring it closer to home: we gossiped;
 we didn't give tzedekah or volunteer as generously as we could have;
 we texted and drove even though we knew it was dangerous.
 This is the time of year that we need the metaphor of Judge to judge ourselves,
 to take responsibility and to make our world better.

That being said, there's one other thing I need to tell you about Judgment.
 If you follow the metaphor of God as Judge throughout the high holyday liturgy, you'll find that
 God is actually described as a compassionate, understanding, forgiving Judge.
 In the poem *L'El Orech Din*, which describes God as Judge in the morning service on Rosh
 Hashanah and Yom Kippur, it says:
 God *acts lovingly* on the Day of Judgment.
 God *overcomes anger and forgives and has compassion on us* on the Day of Judgment.
 The Judging God is actually NOT judgmental, or angry, or punishing.
 The God of the Machzor, if you look closely,
 is actually the God not of the limbic system but of the anterior cingulate!

On Kol Nidrei, we start all of Yom Kippur,
 by quoting passages from the Torah that say that God forgives us –
 “The entire congregation ... shall be forgiven... for all have erred.”
 And “I have forgiven, as you have asked.”
 Even before we enter this day of getting honest with ourselves and confessing our sins, right
 from the beginning, we declare: God forgives us!
 That's actually the whole idea of Kol Nidrei.

It's an odd prayer if you think about it:

Kol Nidrei declares that we annul our oaths and vows - ?!

That's how we enter the holiest day of the year??

By cancelling all of our promises?

Yes – it's a statement of radical forgiveness and acceptance:

We enter this day of atonement, this high point of all of our teshuva and self-improvements over the last ten days, recognizing that

We just don't fulfill all of our hopes.

We mess up and we're not perfect.

And we're forgiven for that.

We recognize that our promises to ourselves often don't turn out the way we imagined.

Our lives don't turn out the way we imagined and are sometimes even a mess.

Judgment allows us to make changes and make amends, but we don't stay there in Judgment.

We don't dwell in regret, shame, or beating ourselves up.

The God of Yom Kippur forgives, has compassion on us, holds us lovingly as we find acceptance for the mistakes we've made and for the promises we didn't keep.

Yes, the ancient rabbis imagined God on a throne because that metaphor worked for them 2000 years ago.

But they also taught that when we sound the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, God moves from the throne of Din or Judgment to the throne of Rachamim or Compassion.

In the metaphor of God as Judge, God moves from Judgment to Compassion

And in that, God is role modeling for us to be compassionate with ourselves and with each other.

Can we move from the seat of Judgment to the seat of compassion?

Can we move from our limbic system's anger and fear to

Our anterior cingulate's compassion and love?

Truly, that is what these high holydays are all about:

Reflecting on our lives so that we can make changes in ourselves and in our world.

And in the process, finding Divine compassion for ourselves and for others.

And the metaphor of God as Judge is the poetry that allows us to enter into this transformative work,

if we can navigate the pitfalls of taking the metaphor too literally.

So what happened to the bat mitzvah girl, you ask?

I told her she didn't have to have a bat mitzvah but I invited her to do an independent study with me instead.

After a year of study, guess what?

the girl discovered that there was a lot more to Judaism than the particular images found in the Machzor.

She ended up deciding for herself to celebrate her bat mitzvah.

...And then she became a rabbi.

Well, not yet actually, but you never know.
Because I was a whole lot like that bat mitzvah girl
asking questions about God,
and look what happened to me!

I wish you a Yom Kippur filled with deep prayer and transformation
May the art and poetry of the Machzor
open insights, growth, and healing for you and for our world.
And may Judgment give way to Compassion full of forgiveness and love.

G'mar Chatima Tova.