

Leaning Back into God

Sermon for Yom Kippur 5767

Rabbi Ellen Lippmann

“Remember, you can always lean back into God,” my spiritual director told me at a time I needed to lean into something. Spiritual direction is relatively new for Jews, borrowed from a long-established practice in Catholicism but also hearkening back to the teacher’s role in early Hasidic Judaism. “Lean back into God,” I thought to myself. “What the hell does that mean?” And then I leaned back in a chair perfectly tailored to this suggestion with a high surrounding back, and felt the chair and God’s presence and was comforted.

My spiritual director did not make this up, I have discovered, but rather was passing on wisdom she had learned. I too now pass this on, and so often when I have said, “Lean back into God,” I can see people’s shoulders relax, their breathing calm.

Last week I spoke about Israel, overcoming a certain amount of fear to speak to you honestly about that thorny, complicated, deeply felt place. The traditional pillars of Judaism are God, Torah and Israel. Speaking about Israel feels like a piece of cake compared to talking about God in this place, where long before we wrote a mission statement we understood that at Kolot Chayeinu – in Kathryn’s memorable phrase – doubt was an act of faith. I always understood it to mean that being able to move from complete disbelief to doubt was itself a leap of faith! Yet here I stand to speak of faith and of God.

A few weeks ago a Kolot member told me she really appreciated my piece in the Voices issue about the Sh’ma. As I was thanking her, she said that her neighbors, who belong to a more traditional shul in the area, had told her that they understood that I don’t believe in God. This seems to be because I quoted “doubt is an act of faith” in an article in the local paper, and spoke about Kolot’s wide open doors to people of faith, doubt, uncertainty, or disbelief -- such a reasonable mix in an uncertain world. Somehow this translated into “the rabbi doesn’t believe in God.” So this sermon is in part a response, or at least a hand held up to say, “Wait a minute.”

It is also a response to all of you, the seekers and doubters, the skeptics and yearners I have met with over the years who wanted to have some way to think about God that wasn’t what you had learned in Hebrew school and didn’t require leaving mind or heart behind.

For the record, I do believe in God, though I don’t think belief is the issue. Believing in God is really a way of saying “I am willing to swallow this or that depiction of God that fits with what I believe already.” So for me, for instance, Kolot member Sheila Bock’s wonderful description of God as an electrical field fit perfectly into my sense of God as enticing, powerful, and dangerous. “Our father, our King” doesn’t fit so well, though last year when I had huge important arguments with my own father AND met a real king, those names fit more easily. Behind the names then, as we sang that glorious music, I could sense a presence with whom to argue fiercely and before whom to feel real humility. “Our mother, our queen” opens a whole different image for me of nurturing and yearning, beneficence and distance.

Judaism doesn’t ask for belief so much as recognition and acceptance. Sh’ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad. Listen, Israel, the God whose name we cannot pronounce is our God, and only that One. What is the proper response to that phrase that we say over and over in worship, at bedtime, before death? Certainly not a philosophic discourse, though that is perfectly appropriate in some conversations about God. My answer is “yes.” Yes, I am listening. Yes, I am a Jew. Yes, the Unpronounceable is my God. Yes, only. One.

A famous wag once said, “Jews are the people who believe in at most one God.” With a God you can’t see who has a name you can’t say, there is a great possibility for doubt and disconnection. For me, this means I have to stay awake more: Pay more attention to the small moments and places in which I can sense God’s presence. The lake in Prospect Park when it sparkles in early morning light. Kolot’s K-1 class singing Ma Tovv for the first time. Saying the deathbed confession with someone in the last moments of life. Contented silence with my beloved. My list can go on and on, and so can yours.

For me to access that list, or take note in the moment, I have come to need silence. Last year I turned off the radio I used to listen to as soon as I woke up and every time I got in my car. I miss some news these days, but I bought myself silence and space in which I am sometimes lucky enough to experience God. For me, experiencing God is the question, not whether I believe. In the silence, I find myself singing: Sometimes whatever we sang here most recently, but sometimes a perfect prayer for the moment. A couple of weeks ago, I was really annoyed at someone who was just pushing my buttons. When I got in the car, into my enclosed silence, I began without thinking to sing “Hareini, m’kabelet alai...” the prayer with which we begin Shabbat morning services that urges us each week to love our neighbor as ourselves. When I realized what I was singing, and how I had been feeling about that annoying person, I said to God, “OK, I get it – I get the message to love my neighbor as myself, even this one who is at present the most annoying neighbor around.” I didn’t even have to lean back.

But what do I lean back into, when I lean back into God, which I do somewhat often now that I have been given the possibility? I lean into a sense of presence, a support made tangible by whatever chair I am in at the moment, a response without voice. Does this make sense? I have learned how to meditate a little, and I am very bad at it, partly because of what the Buddhists call “monkey mind” and partly because I need the chair back and can’t sit up straight for long without it. I admire those who can sit for hours with straight spine. I wonder at those who can live in this world without any sense of support beyond family and friends. I can’t do that either. I have always leaned on God, starting with a child’s human image – that old man in the sky – but moving to a larger, less tangible sense of presence, force, light, darkness – life. When I lean back into God, I lean into life, into the force that gives and takes life, the force that makes me me. Elohai neshama she-natata bi t’hora hi – ata barata, ata yetzarta, ata nefakhta bi, v’ata m’shamra b’kirbi. My God, the soul you gave me is pure – You created it, You shaped it, You breathed it into me, and You guard it within me.

A disgruntled young Jew once called Judaism “an old man saying no.” It isn’t that any more, not only old men any more and no longer Old Man God, though Old Man River has a certain appeal. God is the flow of life, the cleansing, dangerous water in which we try to swim day after day after painful joyful day. Into that water, I lean back and feel its solidity, its fluidity, its force. It pushes back, and my back is supported. God has my back, and so I can lean.

Now let’s begin at the beginning: Bereishit bara Elohim et ha-shamayim v-et ha-aretz. In the beginning, God created heaven and earth. Isn’t that how we have always heard the line that begins the Torah? Yet centuries and reams of commentary tell us that “bereishit” – the very beginning – is an oddity, a strange formulation of the word that means “at the beginning” or “at first.” So some read it as “When God began to create...” And others see it, midrashically, as “with wisdom God created.”

But then the “God created” part gets interesting. It should say “Elohim bara,” God created, but it says, “bara Elohim.” This oddity made the writer of the Zohar look deeper, until he saw that there was a space between “bereishit” and “bara.” Into this space he suggested we put the life force of the universe, the vast energy we cannot name. Then, with all of this new understanding, we can read, “With wisdom, the life force created Elohim” -- so that we mere mortals could have a God we could grasp and try to comprehend.

When we pray to Elohim, who is now truly Eloheinu – our Elohim – we can know that we are praying to a mere shadow of God, yet still attempt to connect to what lies beyond the shadow.

Barukh ata Adonai Eloheinu melekh ha-olam: We stand in humility before the breathing heart of the universe, who allows us to see our needed shadow God and who encompasses time and space.

We address that shadow God as “ata,” a masculine pronoun, because our ancestors could only conceive of a masculine God. More recently, feminists have used the formula “b’rukha at” – blessed are You, feminine form. This debate reminds me of a story a rabbi I know told, of being a child in a classroom taught by Rabbi Arnold Jacob Wolf, one of the great fierce Reform social justice rabbis. The rabbi who was then a child declared loudly, as our Kolot children always do, “I don’t believe in God!” Wolf looked at him for a long minute and asked, “What makes you think that matters to God?”

What makes us think it matters to God whether we say “barukh ata” or “b’rukha at”? It matters deeply to us, and therefore is important to think about and struggle with. But God is beyond gender, beyond body, beyond being made in the human image.

God is. And is everywhere, through all time and in all space.

So what are we doing here on Yom Kippur? To whom are we confessing, to whom pouring out our hearts?

Spiritual direction has taught me that it is crucial to take note of our deepest experiences, to articulate them and thus to remember them during the long dry spells when we feel no connection to the life force within and surrounding us. I began spiritual direction in just such a long dry spell, dry and angry, and was eased by the memory of earlier Jews who had prayed angry prayers to God and the possibility that I could too. I did. And then was able to feel God’s comforting presence too, the need I’d had beneath the anger.

Yom Kippur is a long session of spiritual direction, time and space for us to connect to time and space, a place and a way to take note and articulate and remember our deepest experiences. We strip away color and taste and smell and move inward, finding a space parallel to the space we create around us on this holiest of holy days. And there we take note and say silently and out loud: This is what I loved, and this is what I hated, and this is what I want to change and saying it makes it more likely that I will. Singing it makes it even more likely that I will remember these words, but can sometimes shield us from the depth of our examination.

It is from that depth that we act, bringing our connection to God into tangible, needed action. Our ancestors understood this as God’s desire: God wants us to feed the hungry? Pay the worker? Free the captive? We connect to our ancestors and to God when we feed the hungry or free the captive – this is how Jews for centuries have heard God’s voice. We hear what they heard through their words. But only when we can spend time in Yom Kippur’s deep examination and honest assessment can we even begin to imagine moving outward.

Seen in this way, it is hard to blame God for the things humans do, hard even to blame God for what we call “acts of God.” God is more verb than noun, more process than fixed, more moving river than king on throne or steam bath attendant. Each of us has the chance if we want to take it of jumping in that river and swimming with it. As Noah Chase MacFoy reminded us at his bar mitzvah, there will always be boulders in that river, but they are either insurmountable obstacles or an opportunity to take a new way and see where it gets us. That decision is often up to us.

“This commandment which I command you this day is not too wondrous for you, nor too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, ‘Who will go up for us to heaven and bring it down to us, that we may do it?’ Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, ‘Who will cross the sea for us and bring it over to us, that we may do it?’ Ki karov eilekha ha-davar m’od b’fikha uvilvavekha la-asoto – No, it is karov – very near to you, in your mouth and in your heart, and you can do it...holding fast to the One who is your life and the length of your days.”

We will read those words tomorrow morning. Tonight, I ask only that you hear them, and try to take them in.

“This commandment which I command you this day is not too wondrous for you, nor too far away... You can do it...holding fast to the One who is your life and the length of your days.”