

Dvar Torah: *Parashat Vayikra*
An Atheist Jew Comes Out of the Mishkan
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The very first words of today's parasha, Vayikra, and of the Book of Leviticus are:

וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים מִשָּׁמַיִם וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֲלֵיוּ בְּמִתְנֵי מוֹעֵד

“And [He] called to Moshe and God spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.” And there follows for much of the Book of Leviticus, rules for the precise ways in which various sacrifices, rites, and laws, for various members of society, should be executed. A number of commentators, including Rashi and Ramban, have noted that the subject of the verb “to call” is implied; the one who is doing the calling is not explicitly stated. No speaker is specified until the second verb (“and God spoke”). In English, the literal translation is something like: “And there called to Moshe and there spoke a god to him.”

The 19th century German Jewish commentator Samson Rafael Hirsch argues that the uncommon syntax of this sentence is there to specify a *transcendent* god – to make clear that “when God spoke with Moses, it was indeed the word of God addressed to Moses by God Himself... [not something] emanating from within Moses himself.” The Hassidic commentator Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, in his text Me'or Eynayim, also notes that “He called” is written “anonymously,” without explicitly declaring who is speaking. But here the text also notes that Vayikra is written with the miniature aleph, because the spark of god, the cosmic aleph, is present within each of us, in a reduced and anonymous form. “When you go to commit a sin and god prevents you from doing so by some means, that is god speaking to you,” the text reads. So Reb Nachum of Chernobyl is arguing for an *immanent* god.

I want to encourage us today to consider **the risks of believing in any god**, whether transcendent or immanent.

First, a little background. I am a ritual-loving Jew. I have been a (mostly dues paying) member of this minyan and of GJC for over 20 years. I met my wife here, my son is an ECP veteran and now in the religious school here, and b'sha tova he will celebrate his bar mitzvah here. Through much of my adult life we I've constructed with you all, in shul and in our homes, rituals drawn from the stunningly beautiful fabric of our continually evolving Jewish tradition. I love being part of that ongoing conversation, that meaning-making process with you. And as part of my Jewish practice, I have been studying in chevurta with Reb Shai Gluskin for the past 2 years about ritual and holiness

in Torah, Talmud, and liturgy.

The only problem is: I don't believe in god.

I'm coming out today, stating my beliefs and feelings in the most public way, because I am aware of the power of coming out, as a way to build genuine community, empower us, and break down shame, exclusion, and hiding. We Jews intimately know the pain of hiding, the crush of assimilation; in many ways even we identified lot operate at times as crypto-Jews. I'm coming out because I want to declare that my love (of the world and the Jewish people) is good and authentic. So I am a *proud* and *out* ritual loving Jewish atheist!

So, how is it that I enjoy and engage in some ritual, minhag, and mitzvot? It's clear to me that we humans are deeply hardwired to operate in part on the level of emotion, archetype, and tribe. Our Australopithecine, and our early mammalian, and even our reptilian ancestors are present – in the physiology of our brains, and so in the architecture of our minds. We operate on many levels at once, so I revel in that. In a way I am searching for a way to enter ritual/symbolic space without god.

You might ask, “why don't you go to the folkshul, with the other heretics?” The answer is that I belong (literally and figuratively) here at Dorshei and GJC. Having a sense of place here, walking here, in my own neighborhood, is very precious for me. I am here to be with my tribe, to engage with my people, to sing with my clan, to resonate with my friends. I love singing with you; resonating together connects us to our ancestors and to each other.

I want to be clear. I am not an agnostic, but a *machmir* atheist. I don't believe in *any* god, whether transcendent or immanent. The god-light versions won't do it for me. No god to petition, praise, or give gratitude to, no god to worship. Though it's technically impossible to prove a negative, the way I think about it is: I am as sure that there is no god as one can be of any negative statement, as confident as that Zeus, and Santa Claus, and ghosts do not exist -- (except in our imaginations, as archetypes, where they are very powerful). Saying Ruach Ha-Olam is better than Melech Ha-Olam, but it still rankles. My view is that there is nothing beyond the universe. “The universe is one” – deeply interconnected -- makes sense to me, but I can't get my head or heart around “god is one.”

When I say that I am a materialist naturalist, I am saying that I deny the existence of any god; and that I don't need to imagine a soul or afterlife (n.b. after you die is probably something like before you were born) – while all the while acknowledging that thinking in terms of gods and souls is how we are hardwired. So I want to give honor and acknowledgement to our hardwired god instinct (a truly universal human instinct), while reminding myself that this is the ritual/symbolic mode. This is like reminding myself that the Earth is spherical and not the center of the universe, even though our home very much looks flat and like the sun is circling around us. So I can acknowledge our *instinct* for

gods, but not god herself. I'll argue below about the risks of conflating the two.

And I am a sometimes happy, proud, ritual loving atheist Jew. My Jewish atheist naturalism gives me a Heschelian radical amazement about the universe, about us humans, and the stunningly amazing Darwinian story of how we got here. The meaning in my life is all the sweeter because I acknowledge that we construct it, partly from the bonds we make with one another, and from Jewish practice and identity.

Fortunately (?) my Hebrew is poor enough that I understand very little of the prayers and psalms I am chanting. I try not to look too hard at the translations, because they give me the willies for the most part. I am most comfortable with a niggun, or the yay day day part of any prayer.

I'm searching for a way to be honest and in integrity while reciting these god-oriented prayers with you all. And I find myself being curious about how others are praying. I know for most of us, attending shul is a work in progress; I'm hoping our conversation today will allow any others who choose to come out a little about how we are doing shul and life.

I find myself getting a little scared raising this taboo subject. So, I remind myself that this sort of discussion about the interplay among the god of the bible, the god of prayer and the rabbis, and the god of modern times – that god-wrestling discussion -- is profoundly Jewish, and very much *within* our tradition. So I am calling on the spirit of Yitzchach Aveenu, Rambam, Spinoza, and Kaplan, as well as Freud and Sherwin Wine.

And I profoundly appreciate that in most congregations around the world, I'd have no standing to even discuss this blasphemy. I am deeply moved and grateful for and proud of your listening. This is great credit to Dorshei.

So back to the risks of god. Vayikra: "He called," -- believers and activists of various stripes say "I was *called* to do such and such." Called by whom? What's the difference between saying on the one hand: "I was called (implying by a transcendent or immanent God)"; versus on the other hand saying "I followed my gut instinct or what I thought was ethical, and I chose?" For starters, the passive voice smacks of Nixon cronies saying "mistakes were made" – instead of accepting personal responsibility for their actions. My view is: use an I (or a we) statement!

The way I see it, we converse with ourselves, or we converse with other humans – and not to with any actual gods or spirits or channeled voices. In fact each of us has multiple selves, multiples voices and forces competing within us. We now understand, based on research on the neurobiological structure of the brain, how thought and action are emergent properties of competing "voices" within us. The unitary "I" is a convenient fiction or heuristic. Each of us converses amongst our various selves; all day long we do this. I am suggesting that imagining we are talking to a god that exists independent of us (whether transcendent or immanent) can diminish the quality of our listening and talking

to ourselves and to our peers, and ultimately make us *less* ethically responsible to ourselves and to one another.

For example, I am very aware that my father introject – my inner father – is present in this conversation. He died 18 years ago yesterday (by the Gregorian calendar), in what was perhaps the most crushing loss of my life. He did not believe in any gods or any afterlife. And I can feel the extent to which my atheism today is a kind of loyalty to him. And I'm aware that when I left for college, I soon found another father figure, Daniel Dennett, now a prominent atheist philosopher.

So I think it is powerful to think in terms of introjects; but I think it diminishes my memory of my father in a way, to say that the *spirit* (whether transcendent or immanent) of my father is present today in some sort of way that is independent of me/us. Archetypes, and our god archetype and god instinct, do exist – but only within us, and the stories we create.

When we say in the Ahavat Olam, “We are loved by an unending love,” I understand that quintessentially human need, to feel the presence of a secure attachment figure. It's powerful for me to feel my actual father's love for me, which lives on in me after my father's death. But saying that this is god's love in some ways diminishes the beauty of my father's love within me, and the responsibility I have for what I do with that love, how I behave in the world.

In my view, we can influence some things in life, and other things we can't; the power we small beings have is certainly limited. My worry is that saying that a transcendent “god (or a devil or angel) told me to do it,” -- offloads the limited power and responsibility we *do* have. Even the immanentist, god-within version of this – such as “I felt the spark of god within” or the new age versions of this, such as “I felt the spirit saying” – are betraying the thinly veiled supernaturalism that seems to be lurking, for me at least, in any god language.

I find myself worrying that admitting any god makes the world safe for Pat Robertson, and so many other fundamentalists who fail to take responsibility for their views and actions by claiming that god is on their side or within them. I think it's more powerful and ethical of us to say, “when I do something, or interpret scripture this or that way, it is I who do it, influenced deeply by my interconnectedness with the web of life – not by “god (or a divine spark), or Yetzer Tov or Yetzer Hara.” The risk is that by empowering a non-existent entity, we disempower ourselves: we give up some of our responsibility to act justly and morally in the world.

Bumper sticker Baptist lore exhorts that “Prayer changes things.” Perhaps this is so, but not in the way we might first imagine. Prayer, I suppose, might change not the world, but us, the *pray-ers*. As Rachel Falcove said in her 2002 High Holy Day dvar, the critical moment of change in Hagar's story occurs when she is *heard*. After being heard, Hagar is suddenly able to see a life-preserving well that was always there. Something changes in

Hagar – not in the world around her. From my point of view, when we pray for something to occur in the world – or tell a therapist or friend how deeply we are saddened or overjoyed -- we change ourselves, come to know our passions and sorrows in a new way. Certainly via looking within -- talking amongst our “selves,” or talking with a therapist or loved one -- we can come to see the world differently. I guess I can see how prayer as an inner dialog might be useful. But for me, the god part of the prayer – by following a false lead -- obscures rather than reveals my own missing well, my ability to see my way through whatever difficulty I am facing.

I enjoy transcendent experience as much as the next guy; I just think it is coming from my connecting with the group, losing a bit of the illusion of ego – not from connecting to some literal god. I deeply believe in “something larger than myself” – there is so much evidence of the interconnectedness of all things (we are all woven from the same underlying fabric), especially us social mammals – I just think “god” diminishes and externalizes my radical amazement. I think it’s more ethical to say “my awe, or my disdain or boredom *is mine*, based on my interpretation of the world, not based anything god created in me.”

Here is an example from my work as a psychologist of the risks of believing in gods and spirits. I recently treated a 13 year old girl and her family for generalized anxiety that was causing them all a lot of suffering. This youngster had to sleep in bed with her mother, leaving her father to sleep in another room. She experienced a deep terror, especially if there was lightning and thunder, at being in the room by herself. “I feel a presence in the room, like an icy hand. It’s like a demon. I kind of know that ghosts aren’t real...but this one is! I can really feel it!” I encouraged the patient to go *toward* the anxiety, rather than avoiding it, to explore and discover her perhaps unconscious and scary thoughts, even if they seemed silly. She kept saying I don’t know, but I kept asking, with confidence and curiosity, “and then what might happen? How do the thoughts go?” Finally, she came to: “If I sleep in the room alone, a robber could come into my room...and I’d escape... but he’d kill my parents. And I’d feel such a terrible burden for the rest of my life – that I couldn’t save them—that I’d become depressed and paralyzed and miserable, and never be able to get married or have a job.” And rather than reassuring her that this would not happen, I coached the parents to be curious and confident and compassionate about the suffering she experiences and how awful the life she feared would be. And as her parents listened, the girl began to cry...and she reported feeling a release she had never felt. And I explained to her that I think she *has* had a demon of sorts plaguing her; but it is not an external ghost, or any devil within. Instead, the presence, the icy hand she was feeling was her own anxiety, her own body overdosed on adrenaline and cortisol, and her own mind racked with worry. Because she had had the tears, she was able to offer and go with this analogy. “Wow. I feel so much better. I realize it’s not a ghost out there that is haunting me, it’s just my own anxiety! So I don’t need to be afraid.” That night, she began sleeping in her own room, and was able to complete the exposure exercises that eventually completely freed her from this demon.

Similarly, many of you are familiar with the Empty Chair technique, from Gestalt

Therapy. I often use this with patients to help them work through what psychologist Les Greenberg referred to as “unfinished business.” An empty chair is placed across from the individual patient, who then speaks, for example, to her (living or deceased) father -- *as if* her father were in the chair. The juicy part comes when the patient then moves to occupy the empty chair and voices her “father’s” response. This helps her make manifest her father introject, the part of her father within her; her actual father is not part of this process. The risk of gods is conflating the father introject with the actual father. And it’s the risk that my patient (or I myself) will miss the powerful truth that we construct our inner fathers, that we have responsibility and agency regarding what our father voices say to us and whether we listen, etc.

We now know that we don’t need god to be ethical. There is abundant evidence that a moral instinct is a hardwired inborn organ of the human mind. Like language, the organ must be nurtured to mature and blossoms based on the surrounding culture; but the fundamental wiring – like the language instinct – is there at birth.

As contemporary scholars Baruch Levine and Everett Fox suggest, a lot of Leviticus, even much of *Torah* as a whole, is about forming the people Israel -- partly by designating us as distinct from our ancient Near Eastern neighbors. We contrast ourselves with other groups *by the god we worship*; and via how that god commands us to do holiness, sacrifice, kashrut, purity, and justice. We mark ourselves, we cut a covenant with our god, we cut or circumcise ourselves (or our hearts) as part of this group, we practice this way, and not like our neighbors. Throughout Leviticus, the Israelites are forbidden to follow the impure ways of other nations or to worship any other deity (e.g., Molech, Baal, or “ghosts and familiar spirits”).

In my view, a lot of this is about our proclaiming that “our god is better than their god!” We practice *this* way, and not *that* way like our neighbors. John Haidt, a moral psychologist in the tradition of Piaget and Kohlberg, demonstrates in his book “The Righteous Mind,” that we humans are built by natural selection to be *groupish*, in addition to selfish. The *groupishness* is our ability to engage ethically, to think of something larger than ourselves. Groups, clans, and tribes that developed a moral matrix that bound them together, that allowed individuals to cooperate -- even give up their own lives for the sake of the group -- were selected for over groups that failed to cooperate. Haidt shows that our ethical, religious, and even our political beliefs, rituals, and practices *bind us* and also *blind us*. They *bind* us humans together in groups; they are the engine of group identity and community; but our moral stances and our group identities also *blind* us to the humanity of other groups.

Ultimately, the risk, I think, is that **we can make an idol of even our god**. In some ways, we Jews take proper credit for monotheism, for paring down the number of gods from many to one. Our ancient ancestors brilliantly saw the risks of idol worship. And Maimonides wrote of paring down the concept of god, from the god of biblical sacrifice to the god of prayer. Likewise, many of us moderns, including reconstructionists, have again pared down the concept of god, excluding elements here and there of the god of the

bible, the white bearded man in the sky, the petitionary god, the vengeful or merciful god. Perhaps the natural evolution of the radical Jewish view of monotheism is to continue paring down god until we get to zero. If we are genuinely seeking god, trying to connect with the ground of all being, the source, we have to embrace that there may not be one. Perhaps all gods, including ours, are idols.

So, with the kavanah that I'm searching for a way to be honest and in integrity while reciting these prayers with you all, let me kick off the conversation with 3 questions. And *beezerat hashem* (god willing), we'll be able to listen deeply to one another:

- 1) Is there a way in which we are complicit with supernaturalism simply by reciting these prayers?
- 2) Are we at risk of making an idol of god?
- 3) Do we need god to bind us together as a group and keep us moral?

Our custom is for each speaker to call on the next speaker.