

Ki Tavo 5779
Where is God?
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The Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem sends out a weekly d'var Torah. I would like to share with you this week's d'var, written by Dr. Joshua Kulp, which I have abbreviated it slightly, and then I will offer my own response. I begin with Dr. Kulp's d'var, entitled "You Cannot Hide."

"The first Jewish song I remember learning is not the Shema, Adon Olam or even Shalom Aleichem, although I surely knew all three as a young child...The first song I remember was the one I learned at the Hebrew Academy in Margate and it went, "Hashem is here, Hashem is there, Hashem is truly everywhere. Up, down, right, left, here, there and everywhere is where He can be found." The idea seems beautiful-God can be found everywhere. But, it has a scary side as well.

*As the Israelites prepare to cross the Jordan into Canaan, this idea is brought home to them through a series of curses proclaimed by the Levites (Deuteronomy 27:14-26). One of the commonalities of these sins is that they are often performed in secret. The first curse specifically forewarns Israel not to sin in secret, "Cursed be anyone who makes a sculptured or molten image, abhorred by the Lord, a craftsman's handiwork, **and sets it up in secret.**" People need less of a reminder not to sin in public-shame itself will usually be a deterrent. The ritual reminds people of what I learned in that children's song-God is everywhere. You cannot hide.*

R. Yitzchak illustrates this idea vividly in Bavli Kiddushin 31a: "R. Yitzchak said: One who transgresses in secret it is as though he pushed away the feet of the Shekhinah." Sinning in secret is akin to saying "God is not in this place." It removes...God's presence from the world.

But...in a parallel passage [elsewhere]..the Talmud raises a counterpoint: "And is that so? But didn't Rabbi Ela the Elder say: If a person sees that his inclination is overcoming him, he should go to a place where he is unknown, and wear black, and wrap himself in black, and do there what his heart desires, but let him not desecrate the Name of Heaven in public." At times, Rabbi Ela says, it is actually better to sin in private than to sin in public!

The Talmud answers the difficulty by saying they refer to two different situations. When one can overcome one's inclination to do the wrong thing, then intentionally doing so is pushing God out of the world. Why? Not caring about what one does in private and only

caring about what one does in public is putting one's image at the center of the world, rather than God or one's highest values. It is as if one says: "My values themselves do not matter, what matters is that people believe that I have them."

So when should one go to a place where one is unknown, hide one's identity, and there do what one's heart desires? When there is no choice. When one simply cannot do what one knows one is supposed to do. If we take this resolution literally, then we would say that such a person is not "pushing God out of the world" for God is already not in that place. Why not? Because there is no room for God when one is so overcome with one's own desires. And when one's faculties are so overwhelmed, finding God isn't possible.

*As a child, I was a bit frightened by that song, by the very notion that God is everywhere. You mean I can't get away from God for even a moment? With this reading, there is now a hedge on that statement. As it were, God is not everywhere, for God is not in the places where I do not strive to live up to my highest values and be my best self. ...knowing that God awaits me whenever and wherever I try to be my **best** motivates me to keep doing so."*

If you liked Dr. Kulp's message, terrific. Enjoy. You can take a nap now. Or, you see what inspiration you may find in my response.

First of all--in other words, before I disagree--let me say that it is a good *d'var Torah*. I like Dr. Kulp's use of the texts and I am inspired by his message at the end. My only problem is that I don't really believe it. Maybe I'm inspired anyway because there is a part of me that wants to accept a theology where "God awaits me whenever and wherever I try to be my best." I would knock myself out for a delightful reunion like that every minute except when I'm too tired or having too much fun not being my best self. That's where my problem lies--because I do not believe that I leave a vacuum where God does not exist when I am not my best self. I simply do not believe that, as Kulp writes, "there is no room for God when one is so overcome with one's own desires. And when one's faculties are so overwhelmed, finding God isn't possible." I believe that God is still there, but not felt and not heeded. God is always inviting connection. But I agree with Kulp that the move is ours to make.

I take the biblical notion of our being created in God's image to mean that we are intimately connected to and part of the Endless Unfolding of Being, which is God. "God," to me, is both a noun naming the Ultimate meta-Being, and a verb. God *happens* as life unfolds. I believe that we experience God through BE-ing, that is to say, through our experience. We might say that God *Gods*, and we are intrinsically linked to that process

through our being and through our doing. Through the same unfolding of Being, all people are connected to all that is. God works through us, and we shape God through our encounters, our actions and reactions. That is what makes us truly God's shadow--which is another way to translate the Hebrew phrase "b'tzelem Elokim," and it makes us infinitely powerful.

I believe that God drives our impulse toward Truth and what is right and good. Kulp seems to locate that impulse within the human being alone, but I think we would agree that God is the standard against which we should measure our goodness, despite the difficulty.

Regardless of the emotional quality of our experiences, which may be joyful, painful, or otherwise, our vision is clearest when we are most attuned to God's presence. When we are less attuned, we are more befuddled, cold, and closed off to any encounter. We may function in a transactional way, but we cannot be transformed until we are drawn back to our essence. Our finest moments as human beings come when we are most in tune with the Ultimate Reality that I call God.

For both of Kulp and me, I suspect, God is an ineffable ontological reality that lies beyond our human capacity to comprehend. Yet we can and do experience God. We can cultivate that attunement, and it can also catch us unawares. We may also agree that humans can only know God through our experience.

Jewish tradition teaches that God renews the work of Creation each and every day. In my view, all of Creation plays an active and decisive role in that ongoing renewal. I suspect that Dr. Kulp and I agree on that, although perhaps not in how it happens. In my view, through our senses and perceptions, we constantly receive information about God, and we respond back through those perceptions and the thoughts and actions behaviors that come from them. Our transformation and renewal may be toward hope, gratitude, or other positive feelings. It may also come in the form of insight and meaning making that lead to a place of sadness anger, shame, or other feelings we might prefer to avoid. Our task is to be present for whatever comes up and trust that our feelings are part of our healing and our return to our most flourishing selves. My perspective is more about attunement to a Divine presence that is always there, while his is more about human choices bringing God's presence into a place where it had not been.

I believe that Kulp and I would both say that when we are out of touch with God's truth, we are also out of touch with our own transcendence, and that is when God feels distant.

We may agree that each person's choices in this world carry cosmic importance, but I think we differ radically in what that implies. I believe that as part of the Eternal Unfolding of Being, we leave an imprint on God. Our behavior forms us as it shapes God. I don't think that Dr. Kulp would go that far.

We overlap in believing that we are meant to learn from our experiences. Even without knowing why suffering (or joy) comes to us, we can gain insight about ourselves and how we are living our lives by looking for meaning in the way our lives unfold. That striving to find purpose and meaning can engender closer and more attuned alignment with God's intentions.

My theology locates all of reality, including the entire cosmos, in God's metaphorical hands. All that is, exists within God. That is how God is both transcendent and immanent, both *meta* and *micro*, flowing, guiding, and holding. Kulp's God feels more separated yet in a sense more personal, almost like a real person. My "God" is so abstract that using symbols like "parent" or "ruler" feels like more of a poetic stretch, even though the God in Whom I believe, by God's very essence, could hardly be more personal.

The inspiration my theology offers, I think, is that the capacity for us to raise ourselves up always lies within us, at a point that links us directly to God and to the unfolding of all reality. When we are our best selves, we not only invite God's presence; we actually flow with God.

I'll stop here, although much more can be said. With Rosh HaShanah approaching, I think it helps to stretch our thinking about the God before Whom we are called to account.

I pray that we will all find clarity of intention and purpose in our lives this Shabbat and in the weeks ahead.