

Rabbi Taron Tachman

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“God, God, God, God, God: Speaking the Unspeakable”

Earlier this year Rabbi Jordie Gerson, a Chicago native, issued a challenge to her rabbinic colleagues.

She did not dare us rabbis to do a freezing cold ice bucket challenge.

She didn't ask us to eat a dozen Rosh Hashanah Apples in one sitting (*without honey*), nor did she dare us to sound a shofar for two minutes flat. The challenge issued was much more difficult.

In her Tablet.com blog, Rabbi Gerson declared: **Rabbis have to talk about God.**

I know. One wouldn't think this would be much of a challenge for Rabbis...but it is more difficult than you think.

To start—what should a rabbi these days call God so that everyone feels engaged and included? In sermons, bulletin articles and classes, Rabbi Gerson often found herself offering a disclaimer concerning Divine nomenclature. She'd say: “God, or, if you have a hard time with that word, let's say “The Holy.” She also experimented with calling God, “the Eternal” (Capital E) or “The Presence” (Capital P).

She writes: “It wasn't because I didn't *want* to talk about God. It was because I wasn't sure my congregants wanted to *hear* about *Her*. (Capital H).”

After all, as Rabbi Gerson points out—the most recent Pew Report showed that only about 18% of American Jews with college educations say they believe in God.

58% say they believe in a higher power of some kind, but *not* the God of the Torah. That's not a whole lot of true believers.

Hearing Rabbi Gerson's challenge, I did a quick social media scan to see if "**Rabbis Have to Talk about God**" was a trending topic. *It is not.....* But my search did lead me to a wonderful story by Rabbi David Wolpe of Los Angeles that is so good that I can't help but share.

Thirty years ago Rabbi Wolpe received a phone call from a reporter from *Newsweek* who wanted to interview him for the magazine's upcoming cover article on the subject of God. Would he, Rabbi Wolpe, be willing to be interviewed?

The Rabbi reminded himself that he had just written two entire books about God and that he had some knowledge on the topic. He agreed to the interview, and he told himself to be concise and quotable when answering questions.

When asked by the reporter, David briefly spoke about his own experience growing up in the house of a rabbi. David said that his father's rabbinate was very different from his own.

Rabbi David Wolpe's father became a rabbi not long after the Holocaust had ended and the priority back then was building Jewish schools, synagogues, Jewish Federations and the Land of Israel. The Rabbinic focus, David explained to the reporter, was therefore much more communal.

A few weeks later when the *Newsweek* issue arrived at the newstand, David bought a copy and eagerly opened it. Inside he saw a prominent picture of himself along with a few paragraphs from his interview.

To his surprise the quote attributed to him read: "I grew up in my father's house but he *never once* mentioned God."

Rabbi Gerald Wolpe, David's father, was still at the time, the rabbi of a large congregation in Philadelphia. David could just imagine what his father's congregants would say when they read this. Mortified, David ran to call his father to apologize and explain. Instead of making his son feel terrible, his father was kind and forgiving. He said, it's ok, you have to be careful when you talk to the press. I'm not hurt. It's ok.

David then called his mother. When he explained it to her.... There was just silence on the other end of the call.

A week later David received a letter in the mail from his father and his heart sank. He cautiously opened it and found inside a single piece of paper with his father's handwriting. The note read:

"God, God, God, God, God.

–Love, Dad."

It's not easy to talk about God—not for new rabbis—not for seasoned rabbis—not even for rabbis in their thirteenth year at a fabulous congregation. And if it is difficult or uncommon for rabbis to speak of God, how much more out of the ordinary it must be for those not in the field? And yet here we are on Rosh Hashanah and in case you haven't noticed, today's message is: "God God God God God."

Why don't we talk about God more often?

For one, it's not casual conversation. Oh hi! "How are you?" What lovely weather we are having!" Hey, do you think God exists? Does God have a plan for you?"

If someone at the office water cooler asked you this, you'd probably start looking for the exit door.

Likewise, we want to escape when our young kids ask us their impossible questions about God. When I get such questions from my own kids, I turn to my wife and say with a smile. "We really should have our kids go ask the rabbi!" To which she sighs and says, "You are the Rabbi!"

Most of us, I'm guessing, don't regularly talk about God with each other as adults. If a loved one did start suddenly speaking to you about the Divine, you might worry that they are not ok.

Also, talking about God is a personal and private matter. We need trust and the right context before sharing our deepest beliefs or our gnawing doubts. No one wants to be judged, coerced or *God-splained*. We don't want to unintentionally offend someone else if the other has a different perspective. Some of us, I imagine, don't talk about God because, well, we are not sure *what* we believe.....

What we do know is that the notions of God we heard as children don't work for us: God as an all powerful, old bearded man in the sky.....God who flooded the earth but only saved Noah and two animals of every kind, God of Kosher who doesn't want us to have shrimp and bacon. *What kind of cruel God would forbid such delicacies?*

On Rosh Hashanah we encounter conceptions of God that may further distance us. God who judges us and who decides whether we will live or die in the coming year,

based on our behavior, God who orders Abraham to offer his child as a sacrifice.....
Such portrayals of God, understandably, don't resonate with everyone.

At her congregation in Greenwich, Connecticut, Rabbi Gerson offered a class which she cleverly entitled: "Tell me about the God you don't believe in."

I don't know for sure, but I imagine that in her first class she reminded her adult students that Judaism says it is ok to have doubts. It is ok to ask questions. It's ok to be a skeptic and that Judaism does not demand that one sacrifice one's intellectual integrity. I also imagine that rather than starting with the question: "Do you believe in God," maybe she instead asked this question: "When in your life have you felt like God was with you?"

Was there a time that you felt God's presence; whether it be a special moment of joy-like a blessed life cycle event or holiday in the company of family and community or a moment of awe like holding a little baby in your arms?

Maybe you felt God's loving presence at a moment of difficulty when you felt sad or alone or fearful. Maybe it was at a time when someone helped you or you helped someone else or helped better the world.

For Jews—we are a people who place deed over creed- we have always considered what you *do* to be more important than what specifically you believe.

Though Rabbi Gerson's congregants had little practice talking about God as adults, she found that there was a real hunger for such conversations. Even the agnostics, she said, told her that they had been waiting their entire lives to talk about God.

I would also imagine that if any atheists attended her class they too would have much to contribute. Or maybe they would just enjoy being with the people. As they say: “Shlomo goes to Shabbat Services to talk to God. Lefkowitz goes to services to talk to Shlomo.”

What the Rabbi Gersen’s congregants knew was that conversations about God were important and they wanted to learn from and with their rabbi. I plan on offering a class like this soon. Stay tuned.

You might wonder: Why talk about God now when there are so many other pressing concerns that demand our attention?

I think such conversations are important not because we will ever be able to prove if God exists or whether or not God created the world in 6 days. Likewise, I doubt we will ever conclusively determine why evil and suffering is permitted in the world and what role God plays or doesn’t play in our personal events.

Such conversations matter, I believe, because they lead us to ask ourselves questions of ultimate meaning and purpose: “What was I put on Earth to do?” What is my responsibility to others? From where can I draw strength, hope and guidance in times of difficulty? What difference does having God in my life make? And while discussing such questions with others, we not only solidify our own values and hopes for the world, we deeply connect with others as we hear what's important to them.

This past Spring a Jewish hero of mine passed away. Rabbi Harold Kushner was a Congregational Rabbi who never shied away from speaking about God. When his young son was tragically diagnosed with a rare and fatal disease, Kushner wrote a book to address his own grief, bewilderment and struggle with faith. He wondered how God

would allow something so terrible to happen and how to go forward with courage given the realities of our world.

Rabbi Kushner's conclusions and the many questions he posed and wisely answered in his book "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" brought comfort and inspiration to millions of people around the world, including me.

Years ago when I was considering applying to Rabbinical School but was struggling to find answers to my own vexing questions about God, I came across Rabbi Kushner's writings.

So much of what Kushner wrote in his many books resonated with me. His writings shaped my personal theology and for that I am very grateful.

Rabbi Kushner courageously taught that bad things that happen are not punishments from God. God does not work in the world that way. Rather, God loves and cares for us, grieves with us and is with us in times of difficulty and that God's ultimate plan is that people will live fully, bravely, and meaningfully in a less than perfect world.

As Kushner writes: "God is not the parent who will keep us safe and dry. God is the power that enables us to keep going in a stormy and dangerous world." God gives us the strength and direction to lift ourselves back up when we have fallen.

As for God's existence and role in the world, Kushner writes: "A God who exists but does not matter, does not make a difference in the way you live your life, might as well not exist." "The issue is not what is God like, the issue is what kind of people do we become when we attach ourselves to God?"

Having God in our lives, Kushner asserts, is a way of seeing the world which leads us to take responsibility and care for ourselves and others.

A story told by Rabbi Gerald Wolpe, who once served as the rabbi of a large congregation in Philadelphia, illuminates Rabbi Kushner's theology:

The story goes:

A man once cried out to God, "God, the world is such a mess—everything seems so wrong! "Why don't you send someone to fix it?" To the man's surprise one night, he got an answer. God called to him and said: "I did send someone. I sent *you*."

On Rosh Hashanah, I believe God calls out to all of us. God calls us to look inward, to improve ourselves and our relationships, and to renew our sense of meaning and holiness.

God challenges us and strengthens us to be healers, to love and comfort others and to be upstanders for justice. God reminds us to enjoy and appreciate the many blessings in our lives large and small.

As we begin this new year of 5784, I hope that you will have more conversations about God and that such conversations will elevate and inspire you. And I pray that in the coming year, God will strengthen you and help you to live and experience lives of goodness and blessing.

Shanah Tovah Umetucka