

G-D
Yk Morning 5771

A couple of weeks ago I got an email from a colleague that happened to include the word God, which he spelled G-d.

Now, although personally I don't see the point, especially as the English word "god" bears no relationship to the Hebrew Tetragrammaton, the four letter personal name of God, which Jews have, since the destruction of the Temple, gone to great lengths to avoid pronouncing, this usage has become common place amongst Jews of all denominations.

Initially substitute names, known as a *kinui*, like Adonai, sufficed, but over time and with the increasing stricture of Orthodoxy, even these were considered names of God. So further alternatives like Hashem, the Name, and Hamaqom, the Place or Space, came into use.

The practice of avoiding the use of any word which may be construed as being understood as a name of God, for example, changing Eloheinu to Elokeinu, has taken on a life of its own and has even crossed over into English, hence the G-d. While I certainly understand the custom and the desire to show respect, there may well be a line that we are very near to crossing that borders on the ridiculous.

At the same time it occurred to me that for most of us G-d is a fairly apt description of what or how we think about God.

Just as it is pointed out that on all too many gravestones the dash between the years of birth and death is all that remains of the person's life, so too the dash between the G and d may represent our total understanding of and interaction with God.

So what could fill that dash? Most obviously any of the vowels - a, e,i,o,or u!

Having spent a week in the summer in Yellowstone with a Canadian friend, "a" has a whole new meaning. Every sentence finished with "ay" so much so that it did not take more than a day for me to just no longer hear it.

"Ay" represents the commonplace, the everyday, the run of the mill moments, minutes, hours and days that make up our lives. So much of our time and attention is focussed on the mundane, that it often completely occupies our thought processes as well as taking up almost all of our emotional resources.

The noise, the buzz, the ceaseless activity around us day and night, obscures any chance we have of experiencing even the remotest sense of the Divine as the sacred is buried under the hustle and bustle of everyday life.

Do we devote any time to our spiritual growth and development? Is there any room for God within our lives? Even only a dash worth?

Instead of “ay” we could use an “e”, which sounds like “He”, the conventional view of God with which most of us were raised. The big daddy in the sky who is always watching every move we make, rewarding and punishing us as we stumble our way through life. The all-powerful, mostly threatening king who smashed his way through the Bible and visits all kinds of retribution on any and all of us, puny humans, who apparently delight in making him angry. The unfathomable judge, whose decrees make little or no sense to our minds and whose justice seems to be totally capricious and certainly questionable at almost every moment of the day.

The God who responds to prayer, well sometimes anyway, and mostly not when we really need it. The God of miracles, at least for others, but seldom for us personally. The God who is in control of everything including the weather and the world and seems to do such a lousy job of managing it.

All these are the conventional views of God, and while they may be just fine for some, for most of us they hinder rather than help us in our thinking about God let alone in our quest for connecting with God.

How do we overcome this pediatric, ‘out of touch with reality’ view of God? Is it so ingrained in our psyche and our prayer book that it impossible to change? Is it blasphemous to even try?

And then there is “I”.

In the reading before the *Avinu Malkein* prayer on Rosh Hashanah, we find the words “You are absent only when we shut You out, only when full of ourselves, we leave no room for You within our hearts.”

We have all witnessed the tremendous arrogance that pervades our world. The attitude that our own wants rather than needs are paramount and that we are absolutely justified in striving to satisfy them regardless of the cost to those around us or the earth itself.

Although there is a great deal of good within our society and tremendous altruism, we are still a very selfish society, using up per capita far more resources and with much greater abandon than any other country in the world. Yet we are supposedly the one of the most religious countries in the world.

How does the absence of humility gel with that? Why is a lack of willingness to compromise so prevalent? Does everything have to be my way or no way? Are we “so full of ourselves”, so determined to get what we desire that we have completely obliterated the image of the Divine within us? Has the overwhelming thirst for the material or success or adulation quenched the sacred spark of we all carry within our souls?

“Oh” an expressive reminder of disappointment.

It is usually followed by some sort of expletive, which often summarizes the way we feel when things don't work out the way we would like. When we are the recipients of bad news and when life seems to just be getting out of control.

“Oh” the sound of a sigh, but also the sound of resignation, an admission of powerlessness and hurt. Where was God when I needed Him? Doesn't He care? Doesn't anyone?

And lastly “u.” Ewe, a female sheep.

In this world so many seem to blindly follow where ever the powerful or popular lead, regardless of whether it makes sense or not. Simplistic theology, minimal demands, convenience rather than commitment are the orders of the day.

Even in Judaism, too many generations have a token belief in the religion of their parents and grandparents without thinking or reflecting on whether it is meaningful to them or considering its deeper implications. Yes, there is something rich about tradition and rewarding in our heritage, but it quickly becomes emaciated and fades into obscurity when it is never given a thought or fed with genuine study and practice.

A handful of vowels, but enough to dash our hopes and eclipse any remnant of the Divine we may still feel.

As true as these observations may be, they reflect on the partial truth - for each of those vowels also carry within them a very different view of G-d!

“A” - the commonplace. How many times a day are we presented with moments that are filled with light?

One of my favorite commercials shows a series of people each observing a good deed and like the movie “Passing It Forward.” This is of course not a new idea, *Mitzvah goreret mitzvah*, one *mitzvah* leads to another, is an ancient Rabbinic dictum.

While it is very easy to sense God in the miraculous, in burning bushes that are unconsumed or in the parting of the waters, it takes a lot more effort to find God in the everyday, in the still, soft, small voice that inspired our prophets and is always available to do the same for us, if only we will take the time to listen. All around us are opportunities, present in the way we think, in what we say, in how we act, all of which can bring holiness into the world.

The ARI, Rabbi Yitzhak Luria of Safed, one of the greatest mystics of all time, envisioned the creation of the world as an outpouring of Divine energy which was supposed to flow through an elaborate infrastructure, ultimately feeding and sustaining

the universe. However, the infrastructure was not able to support all that energy and collapsed under its impact.

That moment of destruction was also a moment of creation as the physical world came into being. And now, captured within every physical substance is some of that Divine energy and our job as humans is to repair the infrastructure and restore the sacred flow by raising those sparks through our conduct and through prayer, through our words and our deeds.

Every blessing, every mitzvah, every considerate thought and every kind deed helps rebuild God's dream - *tikkun olam*, in its deepest meaning and we, yes, every one of us can be a part of this if we so choose.

Ever heard the high pitched giggle of a baby or the squeal of delight that emerges from a small child on being pushed on a swing, or even the long, drawn out "eeee" of the brave on a roller coaster? The sound of fun and laughter, an intricate part of us as social beings, as well as being crucial to us in our search for the Divine in our lives.

Throughout our tradition, humor is always evident. In Torah, in the Talmud, in Midrashic tales and especially in our folklore we find moments of of comedy, sometime verging on the ridiculous. It appears that even God has a sense of humor. If not, then why command your people to live in booths with partial roofs and have them pray for rain?

Somewhere over the centuries, Judaism lost its sense of humor, but fortunately Jews never did! While we have the amazing capacity to laugh at ourselves and take great delight in making fun of our foibles, our religion has gone in the other direction. Those who hold themselves out as being its most dedicated practitioners, have tried to bury its humor in stricture and sapped all the playfulness out of the tradition.

Laughter, fun, playfulness, all these pave the pathway to find God. Without them, the dash is but a minus sign, with them comes joy, love and light!

"I" can represent seeing. What do we see as we go through our daily lives? To what do we pay attention? What are we blinded to? What do we deliberately turn away from?

It is very difficult to see God in our world! There is far too much pain, far too much tragedy, far too much meaningless suffering? Where is God in all of this? Why should we even bother struggling with a concept that seems so absent in our daily lives and especially in our world?

This is, I believe, definitely a case of "God being in the eye of the beholder." When I lived in South Africa, I was a fairly keen amateur astronomer. I spent all too many hours, when I should have been sleeping, with my eye glued to a telescope, examining stellar objects and phenomenon that were and still are breathtaking in their beauty and expanse.

One learns very quickly that patience is an absolute necessity, not only when trying to observe events like meteor shows, but also just in the process of normal, everyday observation. It takes a while to fully adapt to the darkness, it takes even longer to learn to use peripheral vision and much, much longer to learn how to spot far off comets or asteroids by tracking their motion against the starry back ground.

Opening ourselves up to see or experience God requires a similar learning process and concerted effort. It is not quite as simple as some have it, especially when we bring a whole lot of baggage along with us.

In his book "A Wild Faith" Rabbi Mike Comins talks of entering into "receptive mode", a state of mind which enables us to allow both internal and external spiritual forces to act within and upon us. Using breath, meditation, prayer and other techniques we can develop the practice of being in "receptive mode" and thereby begin to see the world around us through very different eyes, more perceptively and with greater and deeper sensitivity.

The mystics talk of *shefa*, the Divine flow of energy that permeates our universe. That energy, *chiut*, is present in everything in our world and it is, according to them and Rabbi Comins, possible for all of us to learn to sensitize ourselves to it.

Have you ever gazed out over the indescribable chasm of the Grand Canyon or witnessed the powerful rushing cascade of thousands of tons of water over Niagara Falls? Have you walked amongst the alien mudpots and geysers of Yellowstone, stood upon the summit of a mountain peak thousands of feet high? Have you seen the ghostly Northern lights lighting up the darkest sky or examined the rings around Saturn and the pock marked face of the silver moon?

Oh, my God! It's awesome!

Can we take those incredible moments and internalize that wonder so that everyday we invest the common with some of that awe? Can we find the miraculous within the mundane? Can we appreciate the infinite beauty, the raw power, the intricate balancing act that is present all around us every moment?

Living with a sense of awe, prevents us from taking even the smallest thing for granted. It encourages us to pay attention to everyday, to revel how special the ordinary can be, to be grateful for the privilege of life and be thankful for its extraordinary bountifulness - just some of the keys to opening up the gate to God.

Martin Buber distinguishes between an I-it relationship and an I-thou experience. I-it is utilitarian, seeing the other as an object, as something to be used. I-thou is very different - it is entering into a deep relationship with the other, sensing its essence and momentarily joining with that essence. Somewhere is that magical moment we experience the sacred and for Buber, the sum of every I-Thou moment is God.

One cannot create an I-Thou relationship, but one can hold oneself in readiness, be willing and open to the moment and live one's life according to the I-thou ideal.

When the other moves from an "it" to a "you" something in the relationship changes, it becomes more precious, less disposable, and somewhere in that transition we find the holy.

G-d, a little dash, a very big space. But it can be filled, if we choose to make of ourselves the letters that will complete this sacred name.

Amen