

HOW DO YOU THINK ABOUT GOD?

A GUIDED CONVERSATION



WELCOME

Before we begin, let's review the brit—the covenant—that animates our time together:

1. **Accountability:** I'll show up to our agreed-upon meetings. I'll let the host know the (good) reason I will be absent. I will also be punctual and respect everyone's time.
2. **Presence:** When we're together, I'll be present and mindful. I will listen and share. Life (and our mobile devices) offer many distractions, but I will stay present and engaged.
3. **Double Confidentiality:** What I hear and say stays here. If I see another group member in a different context, I will not bring up anything they said here unless they do first.
4. **Vulnerability:** I'll stretch myself to be as open and honest as possible with my perspectives and experiences in order to create a safe environment that might encourage others to take risks as well.
5. **Respect:** I will remember that all of us are here for a common purpose and I will respect and acknowledge everyone in my group.
6. **No Fixing, Advising, Saving or Setting Straight:** I will give each person the gift of true attention without trying to "solve their problem." No advice unless it's asked.
7. **Stepping Up & Stepping Back:** I understand that some of us are natural talkers while others are quieter. I'll pay attention to how much I am contributing, and will seek to balance how much I am talking with how much I'm listening.
8. **Curiosity:** Judaism is a religion of exploration; of big questions more than answers. I will get the most out of my group by being open to our discussions and the people around me.
9. **Ownership:** This is our community to create. While we have guidelines and suggestions, it is ours to shape and form. We will get out of it what we put into it.

ASK & SHARE

Imagine that you're required to choose between these three variations : 1) God! 2) God? 3) ~~God~~. What do you choose? Why? Once everyone has had a chance to consider, we will invite everyone to briefly share their name and their answers with the group.

You can use the space below to make some notes to yourself.

LEARN

Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg wrote about her personal journey from atheism to observant Judaism in her memoir, *Surprised By God: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Religion*. In this excerpt, she begins to question the ideas she'd held for many years about God. Please read this aloud as a group.

About six months after my mother died, strange things began to happen. I would walk around Providence at night and I would talk to the moon. It wasn't really an out-loud talking, or even in words, but rather more like a sort of concentrated focus, a communion with this startling orb that seemed to be watching over me in a way that nobody else really was. I began to connect to something long buried that only had permission to stir as I traversed the winding streets, more than a little lost.

I would listen to Tchaikovsky and weep at the moon. Not just the moon, though. I was equally moved by the shadows created by porchlights and crumbling paint that were cast across the lawn, or the weeds sprouting tenderly between sidewalk cracks. I'd walk home from class and suddenly everything seemed to take on a softness, an illumination of some sort. Colors seemed deeper, corners sharper. I would be walking down the street, and, abruptly, the

only thing that seemed to exist in the world was the stop sign at the corner. My mind would go still. It'd be absent of the clacking sound to which I was accustomed, with its endless running commentary about who I had seen and who I would see and what I had eaten that day and what I had to do and what had just happened in class and.... Suddenly the only thing in the world was this stop sign. And, somehow, that was enough.

I didn't know what to call these experiences. I didn't think to label them at all, really. They just sort of happened, captivated me for a time and then I moved on.

For, when I wandered around Providence and slipped into the place where the air vibrated, where rocks and leaves seemed to pulse with opalescent light, I didn't wonder why. I didn't really think at all. The experiences certainly didn't disturb me; they were gentle, rolling, sweet. Safe. What began to bother me, as time went on, was what to make of them.

One afternoon not long after these moonlit walks had begun, I had lunch with a friend at a café near campus. I don't remember what she asked me, but my response caused her to look up at me and say, "You don't consider yourself spiritual? I think of you as pretty much the most spiritual person I've ever met."

The comment stayed with me, confounded me. What could she be talking about? What did she see in me to which this word could apply? I was confused and flattered at the same time, and then I wasn't sure why I felt flattered. Was it a good thing to be "spiritual"? Wasn't it just silliness?

I had, at this point, spent several years studying religion from the perspective of an academic trying to understand what people thought they were experiencing when they talked about God—even if, in reality, it was just a neurological reaction or something similar. And yet... I knew that I couldn't entertain the possibility that my midnight excursions might be connected to the word "spiritual" without extending the word to what I regarded as its logical extreme. And opening even the question of the concept of God made me a little bit nervous, a little bit jittery, and rather nauseous.

Like a lot of people, the only image I had of God, or even of "spirituality," was this mythical, anthropomorphized God, some guy in the sky who sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake. The Torah talks about a God who took the Jews out of Egypt with a strong hand and a mighty arm and who, when He (always He) gets angry, has nostrils that flare. The artists of the Renaissance added a few Zeus-inspired touches: big beard,

thunderbolt, menacing glare. As a child, the only archetypes that I encountered in my upbringing and the wider culture were of God as fascist dictator or, maybe, God as the Big Buddy who makes everything OK. It was this God—the one who was going to somehow swoop down from the sky and save my mother from cancer—that I had so vociferously rejected the year before, and years before that. From my twenty-one year-old perspective, it seemed ludicrous that I would throw away years of rational inquiry and historical-critical analysis, that I would give up my intellect and my power and go mooning after these problematic images in the naïve belief that it would somehow help my life to do so.

Of course, I wasn't experiencing an angry, or even necessarily a personal, deity. And that was just the thing. There was a disparity between the language I felt pulled to use to describe these experiences and my belief in what that language signified. The experiences weren't wrong. The other possibility, then, was that these words—"spirituality," or "God," even—might refer to something much more powerful and primal, something much more fundamental than I had ever considered before.

I had always believed that religious people were deluded, mistakenly transferring their need for a parent figure or certainty in the world onto mythology. What could it mean if the devout had all long been citizens of the remarkable, translucent world that I was just discovering?

And, sure enough, I would eventually discover that a great many people, from the authors of the Book of Deuteronomy onward, understood what I, at this time, did not: that all the business of God's flaring nostrils and mood swings was actually just metaphor, ways of describing the intangible force I began meeting more and more often.

As I hesitantly experimented with using the word "spirituality" to describe these strange luminous rushes—the sense of being outside time, the sense of stepping into eternity, the sense that my self-as-I-understood-it seemed to melt away into the moment—the rushes got bigger. And later as I began, first tentatively, and then more assertively, to use the word "God" to describe the experiences, they got bigger and bigger still.

There was no need for a dramatic leap of faith, for a fuzzy, unfounded trek into darkened woods. My own, lived experience was the guide, here, and all I needed was a willingness to meet it, to allow myself to ask certain kinds of questions and be willing to hear the answers that might follow, no matter how disconcerting those answers might be. This, then, was the real test of faith—not whether I was willing to change my beliefs, but, rather, whether I was willing to give language to that which I had already begun to experience as truth.

As we reflect on this text, here are a few questions to consider:

Interpretive Questions

- What's the tension that Ruttenberg feels between her experiences and the language that she uses to describe them?
- How had she thought of God up until this point? What, if anything, had changed for her?
- What do you think Ruttenberg means when she says, "as I began, first tentatively, and then more assertively, to use the word "God" to describe the experiences, they got bigger and bigger still"? How do you personally make sense of this comment?

Reflective Questions

- Have you ever had experiences of the sort that Ruttenberg describes? Have you had other kinds of experiences that you would describe as "spiritual" or related to divinity in some way?
- How do you understand the word "spirituality"? Can one be spiritual without believing in God or a divine power of some sort?
- How do you think of God (whether or not you personally believe in God)? Is it similar to, or different from, the way Ruttenberg describes God?
- What does it mean to "believe" in God? What do (and don't) you believe about God?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

PERSPECTIVES FROM JEWISH TRADITION

Consider the prophet Elijah's encounter with the Divine, when he is in a period of great distress:

“Come out,” [a Divine voice] called, “and stand on the mountain before Adonai.” And behold, Adonai passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of Adonai; but Adonai was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but Adonai was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire—a still small voice [or: a soft murmuring sound]. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then a voice addressed him: “Why are you here, Elijah?”

-- 1 Kings 19:11-14

Discussion Questions:

- What does it mean that Adonai was not in the wind, or the earthquake or the fire?
- How do you interpret Elijah's response to this encounter?
- When you think of the “holy moments” you have experienced (however you define them) are they vivid and majestic? Closer to the still small voice that Elijah hears?

Next is a very different Jewish perspective, from Albert Einstein:

“The Jewish religion is ... a way of sublimating everyday existence ... It demands no act of faith – in the popular sense of the term – on the part of its members. And for that reason there has never been a conflict between our religious outlook and the world outlook of science.”

-- Albert Einstein, “Science and God: A Dialogue,” Forum and Century 83 (June 1930), 373

Discussion Questions:

- What does Einstein mean when he says that the Jewish religion is a way of sublimating (that is, elevating or making holy) everyday existence? Is that how you experience Judaism?
- What does he mean when he says Judaism “demands no act of faith”? Do you agree? Is faith a component of your own Jewish practice or belief?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

DO

As we conclude the conversation, here are a few final questions to consider.

- What's one insight that you've gained from this conversation?
- What is one action you might take, or practice you might try, before we meet next time, based on what you're taking from this conversation?
- What's one obstacle to taking that action? How can you overcome it? Who might you need help from in order to do so?
- What could we do together as a community based on what we talked about today?

You can use the space below to write some notes to yourself.

Thank you for being part of this conversation.



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