



# The God of My Parents - the God of My Children

12.02.2003 | Marmur, Dow

**A chapter from Rabbi Dow Marmur's book: *On Being a Jew: A Reform Perspective*. Toronto, ON: Holy Blossom Temple, 1994. *Judaism: A Source of Wisdom, a Sense of History, an Ability to feel Pain, Community, God, Testimony, Hope.***

## The God of My Parents —

the God of My Children

The Amida, the central prayer in the Jewish liturgy, includes the words, “our God and God of our Fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.” Does this mean, commentators have asked, that Judaism implies more than one God; that “our God” differs from “the God of our Fathers?” Surely, to Judaism’s strict monotheism, that would be an absurd assumption! And yet, where the Hebrew language could tolerate a phrase like, “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” the text deliberately repeats “God” before mentioning each of the three patriarchs. Why?

The traditional answer is that, although God is the same, the individual has to find God for himself or herself, and, therefore, is bound to perceive God differently. God does not change, but since each person’s perception is different, individual and very limited, one can, at best, only fathom the reality that is God. Thus God — who is always the same — is different in the perception of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets, sages, scholars and ordinary folk who came after them. Tradition is the sum of these experiences and, yet, also incomplete: it beckons us to add our own.

Jewish tradition, is both “our God” and “the God of our Fathers”; it is “the God of Abraham” and “the God of Isaac” and “the God of Jacob”; and it is God as perceived by prophets and priests in the Bible, by the rabbis of the Talmud, by philosophers from Philo to Buber, by the codifiers and the preachers through the ages, by mystics and rationalists, by fundamentalists and liberals. It is the God of patriarchs and matriarchs; it is the God of our parents as well as our God. Jewish tradition is the sum of these in a composite and complex picture that we describe as Torah.

Originally, the term Torah was used to denote the Pentateuch only, but, in time, it came to describe all of Jewish tradition. As a rabbi, I speak as an exponent of that 3,000-and-more-year-old tradition.

I cannot ever do it full justice. I can, however, look at it from my particular perspective, which is something like this: In certain epochs in Jewish history, for example, in the Middle Ages, exponents of Judaism preferred to look backward instead of looking forward. For valid historic reasons, they sought to chart the past in as much detail as possible. They assumed that to know what the God of our Fathers wanted of them and who God was for them, would almost automatically tell us who our

God is for us and what God wants of us. A popular expression of this kind of religiosity is reflected in the phrase, "What was good enough for my parents is good enough for me." A deep reverence and piety for the past follows this, a reverence that, for all its nobility, masks a crippling insecurity and leads to a staid, well-ordered and legalistic way of life.

The most effective way for earlier generations to break out of this spiritual straitjacket was through mysticism. By its nature — and often despite outward "respectability" — mysticism was daring and experimental. Jewish mysticism almost invariably retained a loyalty to, and a reverence for, the past. Yet it also enabled its adherents to find "our God," not only in terms of "the God of our Fathers."

Much in modernist Judaism builds on this tradition. However, under the influence of modernity, Jewish movements that emerged after the emancipation of the Jews in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were more interested in stressing "our God" and more prone to criticize, even denounce, the kind of religiosity that hides behind the pietistic phrase, "the God of our Fathers." These movements were no longer satisfied with the maxim, "What was good enough for my parents is good enough for me." Instead, their slogan was, "What is good enough for my children is good enough for me." In contrast to mediaeval Judaism, modern Judaism became future-oriented. This does not mean Jewish modernists ignored or minimized the past. They just viewed it differently and refused to be bound by it.

As a Reform rabbi, I speak from this modernist perspective. For me, the past is not, as it is for an orthodox Jew, the final guide and arbiter. Rather, it is a source of inspiration, the stuff out of which my own religious life can be shaped. The past may be my first source of religious guidance, but it is not my only one.

Pointing to the most ancient of Jewish symbols, the seven-branched candlestick, let me try to offer seven reasons for this modern Judaism.

### **One: A Source of Wisdom**

The first reason why Judaism matters to Jews and fascinates non-Jews is because it carries a store of wisdom. Of course, other religions also contain wisdom, but the style and content of Jewish teaching is, naturally, different and distinct. It has influenced the daughter religions of Christianity and Islam, and is a strong component in our western culture. Jewish tradition describes this wisdom as Torah, to which I have already referred. Torah manifests itself in two ways: as education — a system of holy study; and as law — a system of codes and practices.

Jewish tradition teaches that Torah is the revealed will of God. Whether you take it literally, which is the orthodox approach, or metaphorically, which is the modernist view, it means that to study the sources of Judaism is to perceive more correctly and more comprehensively what God wants of us. To my parents this would have meant that every word of Scripture, and of the oral tradition that developed around it (recorded in the Talmud, in the codes, in Jewish philosophy and literature) had to be taken literally; for my children, and, indeed, for me, this means that the Torah is a human response to God's call. But for all, the study of Torah is a holy pursuit. It takes precedence over most other religious activities, even prayer, and, as such, is absolutely central to Jewish religious life. To study, you do not even need an *a priori* commitment, just an open mind and a sense of awe and wonder, which is the beginning of faith. Judaism is so convinced about the intrinsic power of the message that it believes that once you study it diligently, you are bound to want to live by its precepts. Conversely, the lack of faith and the lack of piety are often seen as signs of ignorance. A rabbinic saying has it that "an ignorant person cannot be pious."

Moreover, it must always be understood that the purpose of study is right action, the carrying out of

God's will as revealed in Scripture and commentaries. Therefore, Torah is never just education but always *also* law, rules and regulations designed to govern every detail of our lives. It is in practice that the commitment is measured, not in dogmatic statements or articles of faith. The principle applies whether you are a fundamentalist or a modernist. The former is bound to try to accept everything; he or she may be weak enough to escape the law but would never try to change it, because to change would imply a challenge to the authenticity of tradition and the veracity of the word of God. If you seek to modify Jewish law, you become almost automatically a modernist.

In this respect, then, I differ from my parents. On the basis of what I know about biblical criticism and historic development, I see tradition, not as immutable, but as a record of how previous generations responded to revelation, to the call of God. Because of what I know, I feel compelled to offer my own response: to learn from them and to follow them whenever their response is true for me, but to modify, change and innovate when it is not. This is what makes me a modernist.

But, whether fundamentalist or modernist, adherence to Torah is basic. The Pentateuch is read in the Synagogue on Sabbaths and festivals. Members of the congregation are called upon to recite a benediction before each reading. The central theme of the benediction is praising God for having chosen us from all peoples and given us the Torah. "Chosenness," then, is not favouritism, arbitrarily bestowed, but a vocation to study and to practice.

## Two: A Sense of History

To be Jewish means, to almost every Jew, to see oneself as a link in a long chain. To understand the present and to respond to its challenges means to know what has gone before and why. Let me try to explain it in terms of a paradigm recorded in Genesis 32.

After many years abroad, the biblical Jacob returns to his home country. On the way, he hears that his brother Esau, whom he had left in haste and with much unfinished business, is coming towards him with 400 men. Jacob is confused. Is this to be an encounter between brothers, and are the 400 men an impressive guard of honour? Or is this to be a battle, and are the 400 men an army to settle an old score? Jacob makes preparations. He sends a delegation to appease Esau with gifts and he divides his camp in two. He spends the night before the decisive encounter alone. During the night, a mysterious being wrestles with him, but as dawn is breaking and the attacker cannot prevail, Jacob extracts a blessing: he shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel. So Jacob walks away from the struggle with a dislocated hip — and with a blessing.

The book of Genesis, which tells this story, does not inform us who the mysterious being was. There are many speculations and interpretations. The medieval Jewish commentator, Rashi, summarizing rabbinic tradition, identifies him as "the guardian angel of Esau."<sup>1</sup> Bearing in mind that in that tradition Jacob represents the Jew and Esau the gentile, Rashi's interpretation becomes significant: Jacob the Jew, the spirit of Hebraism, wrestles with the spirit of the surrounding gentile world. By surviving the struggle, Jacob *becomes* Israel. He is maimed, but also blessed. Seen in this light, the biblical story in its rabbinic interpretation becomes a paradigm for Jewish existence: Israel is the result of the struggle between the spirit of Hebraism and the surrounding civilization. It is a painful and beneficial encounter. Only in this way can Jacob become Israel.

Jewish history can be viewed as a succession of encounters of this kind. Each is a risk *and* an opportunity. The risk is annihilation; the opportunity is renewal and rebirth. In our time, the former is symbolized by Auschwitz, the latter by the existence of the State of Israel.

To recognize this drama and try to discern its purpose, is to perceive something of the essence of Judaism: that is, to view chosenness not as favouritism, but as a peculiar obligation. Part of that obligation expresses itself in the need to honour the memory of the martyrs of our people. To know

what happened to Jews in the Hitler period has become a kind of religious duty; to prevent its recurrence has become another, and greater, one.

It is in this context that it may be possible to understand the Jewish preoccupation with the Jewish state. I know it is fashionable to accuse Jews of being racist, imperialist and militarist, and to identify us with every possible anti-symbol. But I believe, sadly, this is the price we must pay for being conscious of history as part of our religious heritage. For Jews, the State of Israel is nothing more than a chance, perhaps the only chance, to remain Jews and to ensure that never again will six million of us be led as lambs to the slaughter. It is possible that in the eyes of our non-Jewish neighbours we may seem somewhat hysterical. But I hope our friends will understand our reason; that they will appreciate the sense of history that evokes this response.

In modern Jewish theology, survival has become a religious category. In the words of Emil Fackenheim, only by surviving as Jews can we prevent Hitler from having a posthumous victory. The State of Israel is the vehicle of that quest of survival. Only through it can Jews find purpose, despite Auschwitz. More recently, the stress on survival has been augmented by an affirmation of continuity; there are signs of less emphasis on the present and more on a vision of the future.

### **Three: An Ability to Feel Pain**

The talent for remembering our own pain, and trying to feel the pain of others, is life-affirming, not life-denying. The commitment to try to alleviate pain helps us not only to find purpose but also joy in life. Judaism is a happy religion; its solemnity is never less than joyous. In this respect, it contrasts sharply with the secularism of our time that, for all its clamour for “paradise now,” appears gloomy and dull. What is so characteristic of Jewish humour — to be able to laugh with one eye and cry with the other — is a true reflection of the Jewish attitude to life.

### **Four: Community**

Our affirmation of life and need to care express themselves in the seemingly ordinary: in the family, the congregation and the community at large. Community is yet another link between parents and children.

The joy of having survived and being alive prompts us to share this joy with others. We do so by celebrating holy events in the life of individuals and in the history of our people. This helps us cement relationships and relive the past. Many of our rituals and ceremonies are linked to the sense of community. They offer a framework of security in the midst of a perplexing and hostile world. For non-Jews, this seems at times bizarre and exclusive, and evokes a mixture of envy and hostility on which antisemitism thrives. Much of Jewish life takes place in the family and in the extended family we call our congregation or community. The rabbi acts as teacher and catalyst, not as priest. He or she is also the person who often seeks to find a way of linking “our God” with “the God of our Fathers.” The community offers the milieu that makes such a bridge possible.

### **Five: God**

A congregation is a *kehilla kedosha*, a holy congregation. Belonging is not only a matter of survival, but a question of spiritual integration, of holiness. The Jew who wishes to be part of the Jewish community identifies with the quest for spiritual integration or holiness. It is the experience of Judaism that God cannot be found on a remote island but is revealed in the midst of the people; Scripture insists that the whole Israelite community was present at Sinai. God is not an *a priori* category, a philosophical abstraction with which one has to start one’s religious quest. Instead, God is to be sought in the company of like-minded seekers. To belong to a community does not mean that you start with certainties, but that you have a desire to look for them. That is

why so many seemingly irreligious Jews belong to congregations. Through membership in the community, I am exposed to what Peter Berger, the sociologist, calls “signals of transcendence,” intimations of what it means to be with God.<sup>2</sup> Through the community, I may be able to experience God even when I do not understand. That is why, in this list of the seven branches of Judaism, God is not mentioned first, but only after Torah, history, pain and community.

This does not mean, of course, that belief in God is unimportant in Jewish tradition. What must be understood, however, is that a philosophical conception of God is not a prerequisite for being a Jew. You start by sharing the wisdom, the history, the pain and the community. Through these, you may come to an experience of God. And, as I said, although God is One and Unique and always the same, we perceive God differently. That perception, however, becomes pale and, at times, even misleading if we try to confine it to a definition. God, Jewish philosophers have taught, can only be described by negative attributes: we can say what God is *not*, but it is impossible to say what, or who, God actually is.

Martin Buber reflected much of this in his writings: God can only be addressed; God cannot be expressed; we can speak *to* God but not *about* God. Buber has shown how we can receive intimations of God — Berger’s signals of transcendence — through interpersonal relationships. Through an I-thou relationship, I can move towards a relationship with the Eternal Thou. By contrast, philosophy and abstract theology can only perceive God as an object, as an “it,” thus becoming a barrier rather than an aid to faith. Jewish tradition bears out Buber’s idea of God. Never does it demand a confession of faith, an adherence to dogmas. We are entitled to perceive God differently, because we are not expected to define our perception.

We cannot express God, only address God, and we feel more confident to do so when we are with like-minded people in the midst of a worshipping congregation. That is why the community is there, not only to teach the wisdom and the history and share the pain, but also to help us to pray together. Prayer reflects tradition and yet stresses immediacy; through it, we can celebrate our special relationship with God. Chosenness, in this context, resembles the relationship of lovers. The biblical prophets used the image of marital love as a metaphor for the relationship between God and Israel. The Song of Songs was included in the biblical canon as the perfect allegory of that relationship. The Christian distinction between *eros* and *agape* — human love and divine love — is, therefore, unknown in Judaism. The commandments “Love the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:5) and “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Leviticus 19:18) use the same Hebrew word, *v’ahavta*.

Despite the apparent exclusiveness, everybody can share the relationship exemplified in the dual commandment to love. For God is the God of all humanity. Scripture begins with Adam, the first man, not with Abraham, the first Jew. In this universal scheme of things, Israel has a special task: it is to be the catalyst, whose concerns are the concerns of the whole world. Redemption is not reserved for the Jewish people, but must come to all humanity. The nations of the world will deserve it by being true to their ancestral faiths — in the same way as Jews must be true to their religion, Judaism.

## Six: Testimony

Our real aim is to testify to the presence of God. The Jews see themselves as having the duty to testify to the power and reality of God in the world. Through the study of Scripture, tradition and history, I can establish a link with the past, a line of communication with the God of my parents. Through the experience of pain, I must affirm life. One manifestation of this affirmation is the emphasis on human relationships: the family and the community. Such relationships point to the source of all love, God. Through our collective experience of pain, we are made to love humanity and to love God. The problem of theodicy is resolved in the determination to alleviate misery. In

this way, we come to testify to Job's affirmation, "though He slay me yet will I trust in Him" (Job 13:15). This testimony is particularly poignant in our generation when Auschwitz survivors could praise God and speak of God's power and goodness, despite all that befell them.

To be a Jew, then, is something of a heroic act. We are not Jews because it is comfortable but, whether it is or not, we discharge our responsibility to God by affirming our Judaism. Being Jewish in the face of persecution and assimilation is a religious act. It brings us beyond the dichotomy of universalism versus particularism. Chosenness is not self-centred or smug, but a messianic obligation. Isaiah's suffering servant is the Jewish people itself, a line of exegesis suggests. Israel's history reflects God's plan for the world. Israel seeks to share its insights and experience with others, not to convert, but to show, through autobiography, rather than theology, that God is and that God must be adored and obeyed, even when God appears remote and angry.

## Seven: Hope

All this becomes possible only through the Jewish propensity for hope. Protestant theologian, Jürgen Moltmann, in his *Theology of Hope*, showed that Judaism is founded on the idea of covenant. God says to the people: Here are the commandments; if you observe them I will carry out My part of the agreement and take you to the Promised Land.<sup>3</sup> By accepting my responsibilities and my obligations as a Jew, by living my Judaism, I am stating my conviction that God will keep the other part of the "bargain" and bring about a better tomorrow. Hope becomes a function of my religious life. I don't just wait for the Messiah to come, but I actually walk towards him.

This message of hope is of particular relevance in our age of gloom. That is the only way I can understand Isaiah's injunction to Israel to be "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 51:4), a light in this age of darkness. The sense of personal privilege of being a Jew is mingled with my universalist sense of obligation to testify to the message of Judaism. My religious commitment enriches my life and encourages me to share the wealth through the act of testimony. Imbued with a measure of Jewish wisdom, Jewish history, Jewish pain and Jewish community, I testify to God. I hope in God's promise that tomorrow need not bring disaster, because obedience to God will merit benevolent divine intervention. It also, finally, dissolves the apparent dichotomy between the God of my parents and the God of my children. The messianic vision of Malachi has it that on "the great day of the Lord," when God's intervention will finally become visible to all, "God shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers" (Malachi 4:5-6).

### Notes

1. Rashi on Genesis 32:24
2. Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Harmsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1971).
3. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

© Copyright 1994 by Rabbi Dow Marmur from his book: *On Being a Jew: A Reform Perspective*, published by Holy Blossom Temple, 1950 Bathurst Street, Toronto, ON, Canada M5P 3K9, 1994. Used with kind permission of the author.