God in the Overflow Room

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Beth Chayim Chadashim

I had a pretty secular upbringing. In fact, I didn't attend High Holiday services until I was about thirty: so, a couple of years ago. At those first High Holidays, I wasn't a temple member, so they stuck me in the overflow room. The service was piped in through the loudspeaker system, so we could hear it, but unfortunately we couldn't see it. I took it for granted that God was in the main sanctuary, but I am unable to provide eyewitness testimony.

The overflow room reminds me of the overflow table, when you've got too many people at your dinner party. The queer Jewish author David Leavitt wrote about a wedding where the gay and lesbian friends are exiled to the most distant and inconspicuous table along with other minorities. Sure, they're guests, but do they get the same drinks as everyone else?

We're about to open the Torah, and we're going to read Genesis 21, the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael. These embarrassing family members – the maid, and her son by Abraham – are sent away to the desert, which is the overflow room or the overflow table of Bible times. So Hagar and Ishmael are languishing in the wilderness, with the sand and the snakes and the scorpions, crying in their fear and loneliness, and does anyone notice them? Who would notice a couple of outcasts slowly parching in a wasteland? Who indeed.

In the last year a couple of prominent books have purported to debunk religion and expose God's absence. The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins, and God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything by Christopher Hitchens, make the case that religion is irrational, religion leads to quarrels and fights, and there's no consensus about the right form of religion, so clearly all forms are unnecessary. You could say the same thing about sex. Sex is irrational; sex leads to quarrels and fights; and there's no consensus about the right form of sex, so clearly all forms are unnecessary.

Still, Dawkins and Hitchens are on to something. We live in an age of doubt. If I asked for a show of hands, right here, right now, how many believe in God, I'm not sure God would win the vote. But if I asked how many have ever felt close to God – when you were in trouble, or on a Jewish holiday, or when someone died – then I'll bet we'd get a majority. If I asked how many have ever felt angry with God, we'd get a thumping majority. Which raises an interesting question: can you be angry with a God you don't believe in?

Abraham was angry with God. When God planned to destroy the wicked cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, even though there must have been some innocent people there, Abraham was appalled. Abraham scolded God in these words: "Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice? (Gen. 18:25)" Shall not the judge of all the earth do justice! That's faith! That's where it begins, in that place of anger! Because that's why we need God: to be the judge of all the earth, to be the cosmic arbiter, to be the great ACLU in the sky. If there's no God, then there's no moral balance: you have your definition of right and wrong, and I have mine, and there's no bottom line. But maybe there exists, above your limitations and beyond my prejudices, some kind of absolute justice: and absolute justice requires an absolute judge.

But what good does that do us? How do we know God is here, today, with us? The philosopher Franz Rosenzweig tried to prove it with the Star of David, the Jewish Star. He said the Star of David is the intersection of reality and relationship. One triangle stands for reality, the other triangle stands for relationship: and the intersection is wherever reality meets relationship; that is, anyplace a human being may happen to call upon God. Even the overflow room.

You look dubious. But Rosenzweig wasn't meshuggeh. The Christian scholar Joachim Wach said religion provides the map of the invisible world. The invisible world is, well, invisible, so different people are going to map it differently. But even history's famous atheists, Darwin and Marx and Freud, provided their own maps of the invisible world. Oh, they didn't put God at the center: they put evolution or revolution or the unconscious at the center; but something has to be at the center, doesn't it.

Funny, two of these three atheists were born Jewish. Freud, at least, identified as a Jew throughout his life, even if he was an atheist. Just like some of my best friends and relatives, who say they feel very Jewish, but they don't believe in God or religion. They like to say oy vey; they like to eat a bagel; they like to laugh at Adam Sandler. And I support everyone's right to their own path. But anyone can say oy vey; anyone can eat a bagel; anyone can laugh at Adam Sandler. Is that enough to make a person significantly Jewish? No one worried about defining the boundaries of Jewishness in the days of the ghetto: the boundaries of Jewishness were manifest in stone and iron. But what could it mean to be Jewish today, and tomorrow, if it doesn't somehow connect with our sacred story?

The Orthodox think they have the answer. They claim to have the uniform, changeless Judaism, the original kind. Slight problem! There never was a uniform, changeless Judaism. Judaism has been unfolding from day one. No one said El Malé Rachamim at Rashi's funeral: it hadn't been written yet. We have illuminated haggadahs from the Middle Ages that show Jewish men bareheaded. Jews in different parts of the world cherish different prayerbooks, different customs, different dietary laws. Where's the uniformity?
There was some uniformity in Biblical Judaism, since it was based in one central shrine, the Temple in Jerusalem. But even then, people who couldn't make it to Jerusalem for one reason or another prayed in homes or town halls which functioned as the first synagogues. Those synagogues were, in effect, the Temple's overflow rooms. Since the Temple was destroyed, the synagogue – the overflow room – is all that's left. We are all in the overflow room. The rabbinic leap of faith is that this is all right. The God who used to reside in the Temple is now available in the overflow rooms, from Kovno to Cairo, and from Lisbon to Los Angeles. This was an innovation, of course. In fact, it was the mother of all innovations.

And today? Today, I must tell you, the authentic Judaism is the Judaism of integrity. What's Judaism without integrity? We need the intellectual integrity to admit that our religion has grown and changed over the centuries: Moses didn't come down from Sinai with gefilte fish. We need the moral integrity to see that men are not better than women, and Jews are not better than non-Jews, and destroying the planet isn't kosher. We need the spiritual integrity to pray from our heart, treating the prayerbook as a resource not a straitjacket.

The prayerbook is actually the most variable document in the Jewish library. We don't change the Bible, or the Talmud, even if we find something baffling or offensive in their pages: they are historical volumes, and they say what they say, and we deal with it through the tradition of midrash, creative interpretation. But the prayerbook is the book you can change. It has evolved from the beginning, by translation, by rearrangement, by omission, and by expansion.

I see the prayerbook expanding further in our own time, new prayers coming in from the fringes and the margins and the wilderness. Our grandparents didn't say a healing prayer in the Friday night service, but why shouldn't we add one? There are lonely Jews in that overflow room called the hospital who need our prayers. There doesn't happen to be a ritual for same-sex marriage in the traditional prayerbook, but why shouldn't we write one? There are loving couples at that overflow table called the queer community who need our blessings.

Is God OK with that? The fact is, revelation is ongoing. Mythically it all happened at Sinai, but historically the rabbis have always felt free to change the rules on God's behalf. For example, Chanukkah is a post-Biblical holiday, but when we light the Chanukkah candles, we say a v'tzivvanu blessing, which means we're fulfilling a commandment. Whoa! A post-Biblical commandment! That means revelation is ongoing.
Ninety years ago, Franz Rosenzweig and his colleague Martin Buber had an amazing insight about God and revelation. They perceived that the content of revelation is subjective. Revelation is relational: it requires two parties, a sender and a receiver; and the message is shaped by the consciousness of each party. The voice of God is like the voice of the shofar: moving, piercing, ancient; but what exactly is it saying? It is saying something different to each listener. Justice is universal, but holiness is personal. God empowers us to find holiness wherever we may: at work, home, school, the beach, or the desert.

So Hagar and Ishmael are ostracized, like peaceniks at the Pentagon, and get sent to the overflow room. Hagar and Ishmael are banished, like minorities at a snooty wedding, and get bumped to the overflow table. But God remembers them. God says, "What troubles you, Hagar? Don't be afraid (Gen. 21:17)." God tells her, "Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand (Gen. 21:18)." The 13th-century rabbi Nachmanides said that experience qualifies Hagar as a kind of prophet: after all, God spoke to her. How about that! The unemployed foreign maid was a prophet!

There's no final proof that God exists. There's also no proof that love exists, or truth, or freedom. These things are abstractions of a very high order. The point is that we need to believe in them. And God needs to believe in us, too. God also needs to believe there's some purpose to it all. Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote a book about God in search of humanity. Nice switcheroo: humanity in search of God, God in search of humanity. And God is most likely to find us when we're most open to relationship.
What the Torah is going to teach us today is that God notices the stranger, God welcomes the maverick, God embraces the outcast. The rest of the clan may be partying back at the oasis, while Hagar and Ishmael are weeping at the overflow crag: but God shows them a well (Gen. 21:19), so they can get the same drinks as everyone else. This is a pretty empowering story, for anyone who ever felt like the black sheep of the family. God is there for us too!

All of us are sometimes at the overflow table: because we're young or we're old, we're minority or we're immigrants, we have health issues or mobility issues, we're gay or lesbian or queer or just a little strange. But we can depend on it that God is at the main buffet and in our corner of the desert. It's God's purview to remember the forgotten, to remember the people in the far corners of the earth, and of course to remember the dead: they're in the ultimate overflow room.

Just as the fringe is the most important part of the tallit, the folks on the margin are the most important part of society. They give the community its uniqueness, its personality, its holiness. Rosenzweig and Buber felt the only religious certainty is that God loves us. This insight actually goes back to the ancient Rabbi Akiva, who taught: Beloved is humanity, for it was created in the image of God (Pirkei Avot 3:14). No one can ever take that away from us.