

Nathan was a very pious man. He went to synagogue every week, he prayed three times a day, he fulfilled as many mitzvot as he could, and he truly believed that God would provide. One night after he had said his bedtime Sh'ma and settled into sleep, Nathan was woken up by a loud screeching siren coming from his smartphone. He groggily picked up his phone and saw an alert on the screen. The alert said "warning: high winds heavy rains. Be prepared to evacuate the area." Nathan thought for a split second, but then said to himself "I'm going to be OK because God will provide." And so Nathan silenced his phone and went back to sleep. A few short hours later Nathan was once again awakened. He heard tree branches smashing against his windows, the sound of the wind howling and the rain hitting his roof. He went downstairs to look out into his yard to survey the damage in the neighbourhood, and as he opened his front door a boat came by on the road. You see the water had already risen so high that cars could no longer drive on the streets - only boats could get through - and as the boat came near his house the captain of the boat shouted "Sir, sir you must come with us the waters are getting higher! We're here to rescue you." Nathan looked out into the street, he saw the waters rising, the trees falling around him and he said "no thank you. I'm going to be OK. God will provide." So the boat drove off, and Nathan closed the door, went back upstairs, said a quick prayer and went back to sleep. Well as you may have already guessed a few hours later Nathan woke up once more. The storm was so intense that when he looked out his bedroom window, he could see nothing but water below him. He opened the window and carefully climbed to the roof of his house, and he prayed. Mere moments later a helicopter appeared above Nathan's house. The door of the helicopter opened, and a rope ladder came down. The person standing in the helicopter at the top of the ladder shouted through a bullhorn: "Sir, sir you must climb up! There is no one left here. We've come to get the final survivors. Please sir climb up into the helicopter." Nathan looked at the rope ladder and he looked at the devastation around him and he said

“No thank you. I'm going to be OK. God will provide.” Well, I hate to say it but Nathan did not survive the night and when his soul ascended to heaven and he met his maker Nathan was confused, and he said to God “God why didn't you save me? I prayed, I believed, I've always done everything you've asked.” God looked at Nathan incredulously and said “What do you mean, save you? You yutz! I sent an emergency alert, a boat, and a helicopter.”

I know many of you have heard this story or joke or parable many times before in different iterations, but the point remains the same. *Lo vashamayim hi*. It is not found in the heavens. We've spoken about this phrase, several times throughout the holidays so far. On erev Rosh Hashanah Ariel taught us that *lo vashamayim hi* can mean that our Judaism isn't about heavenly pursuits, rather it is about pursuing ethics - how we behave, how we treat each other and our planet, is what upholds the Jewish people. On Rosh HaShanah morning Rabbi Goldberg taught us that *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, *tzedakah* - repentance prayer and charity - are not about making amends to God, rather they are about making amends to each other. About our responsibility to respond to the news around us and to make this a better world for us all. And on the second day of Rosh Hashanah Jamie taught us that *lo vashamayim hi* means that we cannot rely upon unseen forces to create a community in which we are all respected, loved, and appreciated - we have to do that. He showed us that inspiration and acceptance are found all around us - in ourselves and in each other. And tomorrow Brian will be teaching us about the practical realities of justice, of equity, of individual responsibility. But tonight, on Kol Nidrei, I want to talk to you about God, The Divine, The Creator, The Source of All.

There is an exercise that I do with all of my b'mitzvah students usually in the first or second class of the year. Now while I would love to do this exercise with all of you right now, we don't quite have that much time to spare so instead I'm going ask you to pretend that we're doing this exercise together. Normally what I do is hand out

blank paper to my students and some coloured pens or markers or pencils and I ask them to go back in their minds to when they were 5 years old. On one side of the paper, I tell them to draw what they thought God looked like when they were 5, then I tell them to turn the paper over and draw what they think God looks like now. And in the decade or so that I have been leading this exercise, each year the results have remained pretty much the same. There are of course always some variations and outliers in every class but for the most part when I ask the students to share what they thought God looked like when they were five years old there is one image that prevails. I bet you can guess it. It's a man, a white man, a cis-het white man, sitting in the clouds, on a throne, with a big white beard, sometimes even holding a staff. How many of you also had that image?

And so we as a class talk and we wonder and we ponder why do 5 year old children think that God is a white man in the clouds with a beard? And these young people are so wise, so astute they know right away why we think this. They cite reasons like the patriarchy. They cite reasons like renaissance art. They cite reasons like movies and TV shows and cartoons, and Santa Claus. They sometimes also say that that's how God is described in the Torah. Often, they are shocked to learn that nowhere in the Torah is God described as a man in the clouds with a beard. Sometimes these children are even wise enough to understand that our pediatric image of God comes from Christian Jesus imagery. We know that currently many of our Christian neighbours are starting to come to terms with the idea that Jesus likely was not white, but up until very recently all or most Jesus iconography depicted a white guy and so if in the Christian belief systems Jesus is God's son, then it would stand to reason that God looked simply like an older version of his own child. And even though we as Jews don't have the same iconography, we are obviously influenced by the majority Christian culture around us.

Next in the exercise, I ask the students to share with the class what they drew on the other side of the page. This is where things get a little bit more creative, but again in over 10 years of teaching this topic, the same themes arise time and again. On the other side of the page, I often see swirls of colour, or points of light that look like stars, or drawings of suns and clouds, or nature scenes and animals, but most often it's a blank page. And when asked to explain how they see God now, to explain these abstract swirls or empty pages, our brilliant young students say "I don't know what God is, but I don't think it's a physical thing that you can see." These young people, these emerging adults, are comfortable with a concept that many of us full-fledged adults just can't wrap our minds around. They understand that there can be something, a force, a concept, a feeling that just is but that we cannot see. *Lo vashamayim hi* – they know that God isn't sitting up there watching us, like a celestial elf-on-a-shelf, and as children many of them are ok not knowing anything beyond that. They are used to being uncertain, to being on a path of learning and growing. But

We are not children. We often aren't ok with not knowing. And so, for many of us who have lived through joy and sorrow, exuberant triumph and devastating loss, we who have degrees and careers and life experience, often come to conclude that if we can't know it, can't understand it, we simply can't believe in it.

I'm reminded of another short parable - a person goes to their rabbi and says "Rabbi I don't believe in God. I probably shouldn't be Jewish anymore." So the rabbi says "Well tell me about this God that you don't believe in." And so, the person describes the God of the Torah, the God of wrath and judgment and punishment. And the rabbi says, "You know, that God you don't believe in, I don't believe in that God either."

Judaism offers many different ways to conceptualize The Divine. In Kabbalah, Jewish mystical practice, we are taught that there are 72 names for The Eternal. 72 different titles, different ideas, for one concept that so many of us have just called “God.” And herein lies, what I believe to be, one of the biggest theological challenges that we have... and it all boils down to language.

The word “God” is a loaded word. For some people it simply means an unknowable force in the universe, but for many of us it just feels too much like well, some guy’s name. That man, in the clouds, on the throne – yeah – his NAME is “God.” He’s wearing one of those “Hello, my name is God” stickers. When we read about God’s miracles, we’re talking about Him. When we pray to God, we’re praying to Him. But if, as we have already established, we don’t think there’s a dude sitting up there in the heavens, then His name – and yes – I am intentionally using masculine pronouns for this being – His name is the name of something that we just don’t believe exists. God stops being a concept, and becomes a person, a thing that we don’t believe in.

When I was studying at the Hebrew Union College the seminary where I was ordained, I struggled a lot with this idea that God was someone’s name. Every day on the New York campus of HUC there were student-led services. The whole school was invited to gather in the mornings for *shacharit*, for morning prayers. To be honest with you, unless it was my week to lead, I didn't go very often. Now don't get me wrong, I wanted to support my friends who were leading services, and there was always beautiful music and learning that happened there, but the more I learned in my classes about the meanings of the prayers and the history of our worship practices, the more detached from those practices I felt. I didn't believe in this God that we were praying to, and so I didn't want to pray. I didn’t believe that God could grant wishes or create peace, or bring about healing, it all felt a bit like a mythology based *bashamayim* – in the heavens, and not something that made a whole lot of sense to me here on earth.

It occurred to me, though, that if I wanted to stay in this field that I loved so much and had dedicated so much of my life to, I would need to learn how to sit with my own discomfort, how to struggle with the dichotomy of Divine Plan vs Personal Autonomy and find other ways to understand our prayers. My logical mind knew that much of our liturgy and our holy texts were written at precarious points in our peoples' history. When Judaism was young and the prayerbooks were being compiled the Rabbis needed to find ways to keep the community together, to ensure that the Jews stayed Jewish. It makes sense that the concept of divinity needed to be powerful, strong, harsh, and in control. The old stereotype of a father who is stern but fair, loving but strict. People respond to authority figures who seem resolute in their instructions and desires. The rabbis needed the Jews to be just a little bit afraid of the great deity in the sky, in order to ensure the future of the Jewish people. In fact, there is a group of ultra-orthodox Jews who call themselves "Haredim" – which literally means "the fearful ones." This fear-based theology truly did make sense for that time.

But we no longer live in that time, and yet our prayers and our texts by and large have not evolved all that much. I understood, during my time in school, that if I were to continue along this path, I would need to find a way to reimagine, to reconceptualize these ancient words so that they could have meaning for me today. So, I challenged myself to an experiment. I made a list of words, words that felt divine to me. And I turned my worship experiences into a little bit of a game. Every few weeks I would pick a different word and I would substitute it for whatever God language was being used in the service, so whether that word was Adonai, Elohim, You, The Eternal, or God I would replace it with one of the words on my list. (in my head, of course – I didn't do this out loud). Love. Hope. Community. Joy. Connection. Kindness. It didn't always work perfectly, but most of the time I found that this provided me with a much richer, more accessible, and deeper way into the prayers.

“Hear, oh Israel Adonai is Love. Love is Oneness.” “Blessed be this holy community now and forever.” “Blessed is Joyful Connection, the Healer of all.”

There were times during this experiment that I thought that I must simply be an atheist – maybe there is no Divinity after all, but slowly and over time I came to understand that my mental block with prayer had nothing to do with belief or nonbelief. It had nothing to do with theism or atheism. It had to do with language, and the meaning we give to words. I don't believe in the man in the clouds with the beard on the throne. I don't believe in destiny or predetermination, but I do believe in the power of love, of hope, of community, of joy, of connection, and I have come to understand that all of those things are synonymous with the true meaning of the word God. I had a lot of work to do to overcome that image I had as a 5 year old, that image that so many of us had as 5 year olds - the man named God, and I have come to a place where I now understand that God is not a name but a concept. A concept so vast and varied and personal that no one term, no one phrase, no one title, can properly encompass it all. The Source, The Creator, The Divine, Elohim. How vast, and how personal it all is.

I'm still not entirely sure what I do believe, but I am working on being ok with not knowing. And in fact, my strongest belief is that all of these ideas, all of these forces, all of these God-aspects are found in each and everyone of us. *Lo vashamayim hi, ki karov lachem m'od.* It is not found in the heavens, rather it is very close to you.

I think it's time to share with you the context of this phrase I keep repeating. In *Parashat Nitzavim*, the third portion of the book of Deuteronomy, the 4<sup>th</sup> to last portion of the whole Torah, the people, the Israelites, are being reminded of the covenant that they entered into with God. Truly, the whole book of Deuteronomy is a recap, a reminder of all of the mitzvot, the rules that had been give to the people – all of the things they needed to know before entering the Land of Israel. It says:

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?”

Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?”

No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.

For I command you this day, to love your God יהוה, to walk in God’s ways, and to keep God’s commandments, God’s laws, and God’s rules, that you may thrive and increase, and that your God יהוה may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of other gods,

I declare to you this day that you shall certainly perish; you shall not long endure on the soil that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—

by loving your God יהוה, heeding God’s commands, and holding fast to [God]. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that יהוה swore to your ancestors.

Let’s try that again – let’s do an experiment.



Surely, this Instruction which holiness enjoin upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach.

It is not in the heavens, that you should say, “Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?”

Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, “Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?”

No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it.

See, I set before you this day life and prosperity, death and adversity.

For I command you this day, to love, to walk in the ways of hope, and to keep the joyful commandments, peaceful laws, and rules of the community, that you may thrive and increase, and that your connections may bless you in the land that you are about to enter and possess.

But if your heart turns away and you give no heed, and are lured into the worship and service of others,

I declare to you this day that you shall certainly emotionally perish; you shall not long endure on the soil that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life—if you and your offspring would live—

by loving, learning, and holding fast. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that was sworn to your ancestors.

*Lo vashamayim hi* – the Talmud explains that this means that the meaning of the Torah itself is to be uncovered not by prophets, or even God's miracles or words, but by humankind's interpretation and decision-making.

*Lo vashamayim hi* - your Judaism. Your holiness. Your faith. Your community does not come from up there, and it doesn't come from up here.

*Lo vashamayim hi*. The Torah, the prayers, this community - it comes from you, what you choose to put in and what you choose to take away. This Yom Kippur let us strive to give love, peace, hope, kindness, whatever you imagine God to be, and let us choose blessing and life. As one community we are about to begin to confess the ways that we have gone astray. The days between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur are for asking forgiveness from others, and the day of Yom Kippur itself is for asking for forgiveness from God... *Lo vashamayim hi* – the forgiveness we seek is not in the heavens, no. It is here. Within ourselves.

Let's begin to search inside and forgive ourselves for the ways we have missed the mark.