

A Taste of Judaism
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1: God and Spirituality

Intro

- Overview of “Taste” course: Corresponds to Judaism’s “Trinity”
 - **God** -- Spirituality
 - **Torah** – Scripture, ethics and rituals – the Jewish way of life
 - **Israel** – The Jewish People and Community
 - It’s just a taste
 - Judaism: infinitely broad and deep
 - The class will continue until March (see Jewish Literacy Syllabus)
- My story
- Why religion is important
 - W/o God, no objective good and evil
 - W/o God, no intrinsic meaning to life
 - NB: doesn’t prove the existence of God!
 - So why do we need religion? Why can’t I just be spiritual
 - Jewish spirituality>text>bound into mitzvot
 - Religion is a way to hand ethics from generation to generation
 - Can’t speak w/o language: can’t be religious w/o religion

Let’s Talk About God!

- Two Questions:
 - What do you think about God? “God is _____”
 - What do you think Judaism (or Christianity) says about God?
- Does God work in the world? When is God?
- Can you doubt God and be a good person? A good Jew?

But what about belief in God?

- It's not so easy to believe with perfect faith.
- Why do we have doubts?
- It is OK to have doubts?
- Maybe if we could only see a miracle
 - Generation of the Exodus
 - But did everybody see them? Midrash of walking through the mud

Here's what I think about faith and doubt

- Doubt is understandable
- Doubt is human
- Doubt is intelligent
- Doubt is, I believe, what God wants us to have!
- Imagine a world with no doubt
 - Imagine that you are absolutely sure about God - Can you do wrong?
 - Police car example
 - Do you have free will without doubt?
 - What is humanity without free will?

Do you have doubts about God?

- You are in good company. Israel (“Yisrael”) means to struggle with God.
- You are, I believe, where God wants you to be.

How do I approach these matters as a scientist?

- I am not scientifically certain that God exists.
- But – I do believe in God.
- And – I am sure that I am in relationship with God.
 - I pray to God, talk to God, cry with God, and listen for God's response
 - God has changed the entire structure of my life.
- I am committed to doing God's work in the world.
- Therefore God works in the world!
 - I mean this literally. God gets the credit!
 - If I visit someone in the hospital, if you give to tzedakah, when Mother Theresa comforted the sick and hopeless in India,
 - Humans were the vehicle
 - But the good that happened, took place because people were motivated by religious teaching, by our culture so steeped in Judeo-Christian tradition.
 - I have also been touched by God working in the world
 - By friends, caregivers, rabbis, teachers and others who have reached out to me and my family
 - When I take the time to remember, I can look up from the mud to see the miracle of God working in my life.
 - I can see God in the faces of the people around me
 - As a result, my relationship with God gets stronger.
 - And I'm inspired to do more for people and to do this in God's name.
 - As a result, God is present in the world
 - Midrash: "You are my witnesses" says Adonai "and I am God" (Isaiah 43:12)
 - When you are My witnesses, I am God, but when you are not My witnesses, I am not God." (Sifre Deut. § 346)
 - This fits nicely with the Kabbalistic idea that we are in the image or “like a shadow” of God.

Bottom Lines on Judaism As Ethical Monotheism

- Definition:
 - One God
 - Primary demand – that we be good to one another
- God created the world incomplete!
- There are problems left for us to solve
- Imagine if God had done everything
 - Doing everything for your kids
 - We would be the moral equivalent of lima beans!
- But we are created *b'tzellem Elohim!*
 - We have free will
 - We can build gas chambers or hospitals
- Our job as Jews
 - Be God's partner in creation – *Tikkun olam* – complete the task
 - Be a light to the nations – teach the world about God
 - Does not mean convert others
 - Enjoy Life!!!
 - Be Grateful
- Most Important:
 - Judaism is not the problem – Living is the problem
 - Judaism is the one true answer for Jews!