

God in Metaphor: A Guide for the Perplexed

(Rabbi Toba Spitzer; ReconstructingJudaism.org)

For many people, attending High Holydays services is a bit like going to a play where you really don't like the main character—where, much of the time, you doubt the very existence of the main character! If the “main character” in our traditional High Holydays liturgy is God, this can be quite a problem for anyone seeking a meaningful spiritual experience. Many of the dominant images of divinity that we encounter during these Days of Awe—God as King, as the Power over “who will live and who will die,” as Heavenly Father—fail to resonate with (or actively repel) many contemporary Jews. We're then left either to suspend our disbelief, be happy that we can't understand the Hebrew, or just close our eyes and enjoy the music, in order to make it through.

What I've come to understand in recent years is that the “God problem” that so many people have—the difficulty of believing in or even taking seriously the notion of some kind of all-powerful, all-knowing Being that interacts with us in mysterious ways—is not really a problem with God. Rather, it's a reaction to a metaphor, or a set of metaphors, that have come to dominate our thinking about God. What is sad about this is that once upon a time, our ancestors employed a rich palette of metaphors to shape their experience of the Divine, metaphors that spoke directly to their everyday experiences. My hope is that we can recapture the alive-ness which once pervaded our holy texts, and reconstruct our metaphors so that they are once again engaging and meaningful.

Why Metaphors?

When I use the word “metaphor,” I don't mean just a literary turn of phrase. The more we learn about the human brain, the more we understand that metaphor is fundamental to how human beings understand and talk about pretty much everything—especially the more abstract things in our lives. We use images and structures from our physical, embodied experience—basic physical experiences like UP and DOWN and IN and OUT, as well as concrete life experiences like eating, building, fighting—and use them to understand and talk about more abstract emotions and ideas. Some common metaphors that pop up in our speech include: IDEAS ARE FOOD; LIFE IS A JOURNEY; LOVE IS WAR; and my personal favorite, ANGER IS A HOT FLUID IN A CONTAINER. Because we are so familiar with these conceptual metaphors, we use phrases like “Let me chew over that idea” or “He won her over” or “She's steaming mad” without even thinking about the underlying metaphors that give them meaning.

God in Metaphor

When we talk about God today, we use metaphors that our ancestors began to develop thousands of years ago as they observed their world and formulated truths about it. Human experience of the sacred—that is, a sense of connection to

Something beyond our immediate, mundane lives and a desire to interact with that Something—seems to be as old as humanity itself. We see evidence of this in remains of burial rituals from as far back as 90,000 years ago and in cave art from 30,000 years ago. Anthropologist Barbara J. King has suggested that religion evolved in our prehistory as an expression of something she calls “belongingness...a useful shorthand for the undeniable reality that humans of all ages, in all societies, thrive in relation to others.” She goes on to say: “I believe that the desire for emotional connection with the sacred is fundamental to our species... **The religious imagination thrives on the human yearning to enter into emotional experience with some force vaster than ourselves.**”

At some point, people started using metaphors to think about and interact with that “vast force.” Some of these metaphors were human, but many were not—ancient people associated natural elements like wind, fire, and water with the divine, as well as animals and other natural entities. Like their ancient Near Eastern neighbors, the authors of the Hebrew Bible used metaphors from the human and natural world to describe their experience of the divine, including Voice, Fire, Warrior, Eagle, Parent, Lawgiver, Water, Rock, and many more.

A New Menu of Metaphors

To make real use of our liturgy, it is helpful to remember that the words in our prayerbook were written as poetry, as evocative metaphors to foster certain mind-states and attitudes in those who interact with them. **Instead of asking, “Do I believe this?” we can ask of a prayer, “Where is this trying to take me?”** Metaphors like “King” and “Creator of the Universe” are intended to help us feel our own relative smallness in relation to the cosmos, to invoke a sense of humility and service, while at the same time suggesting that there is Something in the vastness that both cares about us and holds us accountable. The metaphor of “Parent” speaks to an experience of returning home, of coming back to That which loves and accepts us. As with any metaphors, we need to remember that these are not definitions of God; they are poetic entryways into an experience of Something both within and around us.

We can also begin to employ new/old metaphors for the Divine. What follows are suggestions for some possible metaphors that you might want to try out during services, either inserted into the traditional prayers or during your own reflection. See where a particular metaphor “takes you,” what it evokes for you. And remember - a metaphor is not a definition; whatever that “force vaster than ourselves might be, we can’t define It. But we can try to articulate our experience of It, and that’s where we need metaphors. Judaism’s holiest name for God—spelled with the four letters Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay—is traditionally not said aloud, and is quite possibly impossible to pronounce. It is as if our most ancient and holiest texts knew something that cognitive linguists are just understanding now: we can not directly speak to those things that are most important, and only through multiple metaphors can we begin to express the breadth and depth of our experience.

New-Old Names for God

God ~ Water

Water is one of the most common metaphors for God in the Hebrew Bible, and is used to convey a range of experiences: being nourished by life-giving rain; being swept along by a powerful river; joining in the flow of justice. Just as a body of water can buoy us, refresh us, and sustain us, it can also become fearsome in a storm and overwhelm us. This can be a powerful metaphor for our own experiences of the sacred.

Sometimes we seek spiritual nourishment; we long to drink from *Peleg Elohim*—the “God River.” At other times we feel buffeted by the waves of our life’s ups and downs, and seek reassurance, as in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “*When you pass through the Waters, I am with you.*” Water is life-giving, essential, and powerful; sometimes beautiful and sometimes scary. Just like life. Just like God.

Some Biblical water names for the Divine include:

- Wells of Liberation - *May'anei Hayeshua* - מעיני הישועה
- Deep - *Tehom* - תהום
- Fountain of Living Waters - *M'kor Mayyim Chayim* - מקור מים חיים
- Source/Wellspring of Life - *Ain Hachayim* - עין החיים

God ~ Makom

A common rabbinic name for God is “*Makom*,” which literally means “place.” The origin of this metaphor may be the Torah’s story of Jacob, who, in distress and running away from home, happens upon “a place” in the desert where he has a direct experience of the Divine. Waking from a marvelous dream where he meets and speaks with God, he exclaims, “*Mah nora hamakom hazeh!* How awesome is this Place!” The name *Makom* conveys a sense of being able to experience the Godly in any place; it also connotes forgiveness and compassion, a sense of nearness to the Divine. *Makom* invites us to associate Godliness with all those places where we’ve experienced a hint of Something beyond ourselves. It invites us to find the divine right here, wherever we happen to be—in this Place.

God ~ Rachamana

A beautiful and powerful divine name that we encounter in the Yom Kippur liturgy is *Rachamana*—Compassionate One. It is an Aramaic name derived from the Hebrew root *rechem*, womb, and it conjures up the sense of compassionate presence that each of us experienced before words and thought, enveloped in our birth-mothers’

wombs. *Rachamana* is That to which we call out from a place of broken-heartedness. *Rachamana* is That from which we seek forgiveness, acknowledging the ways we've gone astray while knowing that we are loved and accepted.

God ~ Ruach

The very first metaphor used for God in the Bible is *ruach Elohim*—a wind of God, or Godly wind. The word "*ruach*" means both wind and spirit, and is also associated with breath. The first human becomes a living being with the beautiful metaphoric image of God blowing the "breath of life" directly into him.

Ruach connotes a sense of God's presence within us, as the life-force that beats in our hearts and flows through our cells like oxygen. It is easily incorporated into traditional Hebrew blessings, where we can substitute *ruach ha-olam*—Spirit/Wind of the Universe—for "*melech ha-olam*/Ruler of the Universe." This metaphor comes alive as we listen to the shofar, the sound itself a manifestation of breath, a symbol of the Godly potential that flows through—that is breathed through—each of us.

God ~ Ehyeh

When Moses first experiences God at the burning bush, he asks—What is Your name? The response is enigmatic: *Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh*, most literally translated "I will be that I will be." This name of the divine conjures up a sense of possibility, of becoming. It is the name associated with the liberation of the Israelites from slavery, and it is also related to the unpronounceable name, *Yud-Hay-Vav-Hay*, which Rabbi Art Green has called "an impossible construction of the verb 'to be.'" *Ehyeh* encompasses a sense of God not as "thing" but as unfolding Process. *Ehyeh* is God as verb rather than noun—Becoming, Creating, Supporting, Teaching, Healing. *Ehyeh* connotes possibility and newness—the promise of the High Holydays that we too are in process, that each day we can be made anew, can be liberated from bad habits and old stories and ancient fears.

God ~ Echad

The Shema, which we recite multiple times over the course of the holidays, is not really a prayer, but a few verses of Torah that we use to wake ourselves up, saying: "Listen! YHVH our God YHVH is One." The word for "one"—*Echad*—can be understood here as a name for divinity. What is the nature of One-ness? In the Jewish mystical tradition, the Biblical idea that "the earth is filled with God's Presence" means that, in fact, everything is God. We perceive ourselves and the people and things around us as separate entities, separate from one another and from God, yet seek a deeper reality. *Echad* is a powerful metaphor for experiencing the fundamental connection of all living beings. It expresses the idea that Whatever God might be, It is right here, in our experience of each moment, accessible in all aspects of our lives, because ultimately, Godliness is the stuff of all existence.

I hope these metaphors are useful, and I hope you will come up with new ones that work for you! Whether using nouns or verbs, words or images, may your own explorations of what it means to be in relationship with That which creates and nurtures, challenges and guides us, be powerful and rich.

Some resources for further reading: *Metaphors We Live By*, by Mark Johnson & George Lakoff; *I is an Other: The Secret Life of Metaphor and How it Shapes the Way We See the World*, by James Geary; *Evolving God*, by Barbara J. King.