

BEKI YN 5777 Rosh HaShana Day Two
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1800 Words.

God: All in Your Head

After smashing his father's idols, Abraham is faced with the stark question, what is God, is God real?

We have been struggling with that question as the Jewish People all along.

Today I would like to challenge you with, not with complex philosophy but with popular Theology. My theology is that of the Talmud and Prayerbook, the folk-wisdom of the Jewish People, and *not* of the Philosophy Department of the University.

One of my cousins told me this story (though he now denies it):

Our Grampa Ed believed in God. He generously supported the local synagogue and gave to every charity that asked. He was decent, honest, hard-working, and respected by those who knew him. He helped people out, in a quiet and dignified way. He never intentionally hurt anyone.

But his last few years of life were filled with bodily suffering.

One of his grandchildren asked him, "Grampa, you've always been a good person, so why does God reward you with such suffering?"

"I asked Him," said Ed, "and He said He was sorry, He made a terrible mistake."

Astonished, the grandson pressed further, "Don't you think it is time to abandon this God?"

"Listen," Ed said. "You don't kick a man when he's down."

So I would like to ask you to consider how you think about "God."

God is completely made up, and completely real. God is a creation of the imagination, and God is the most real reality.

First: Here is how God is completely made up.

We talk about God as "King." "Melekh Elyon," the exalted, most high, King. But for a moment, let's use a contemporary office, "President." "Melekh Evyon," the "Earthly, lowly, King."

Of course, in reality, there is no such thing as "President Obama." Now, I'm just using the **office** for my **example**. This is not meant to be political. Barak and I go back a long way together. We were **very close**. So **close**. Barry and I went to college together -- he was a year ahead of me; he wrote about our student group; we were both in Chicago, Honolulu, and Kenya. We were like this [entwined fingers]. I never actually met him. We *were* in so many places together, so like I said, we were "close."

We could use any of his predecessors just as well for our illustration.

As I was saying, in reality, there is no such thing as "President Obama."

President Obama is not a fact of nature. He does not exist in physical reality. Well, the *person* Barack Obama exists, and is as real as you are, and yes, he definitely was even born in this same country -- and has a birth certificate to prove it -- **if** you consider Hawaii to be part of the United

States -- but “**President**” is totally made up, a mental construct, a social creation, an idea that exists in our minds and that is “reality” only insofar as we pretend and act as though it were. If no one treated him as president and did not obey his executive orders or recognize his signature, he would not be “president.” “President” is just made up and is effective only because we agree to treat it as real.

Indeed, some people in congress decided to act as if Barack Obama is not president, and obstructed any exercise of his presidential power, and indeed that obstruction was rather effective. For example, not voting on his nominations, including to the Supreme Court. Whether you think that is a travesty or a good idea is beside the point; the point is to recognize that this happened.

The office of president is -- what kind of thing is it? It is an idea, and it is real, has effect, because we believe in it.

As the Kotzker Rebbi Menahem Mendel Morgenstern (d. 1859) said, “Where is God? In the place where God is given entry.”

One could say the same thing about money, about currency, as a medium of exchange or stored value. Money used to be, minimally, a worthless piece of paper; now it is mostly in an electronic account. It is of value and effect only insofar as we believe in it, allow it to have effect.

As one philosopher wrote, “Has a [dollar] any existence except in the imagination, if only in the general or rather common imagination of man? Bring paper money into a country where this use of paper is unknown, and everyone will laugh at your subjective imagination” (Karl Marx, *Doctoral Thesis*, Appendix (1841)).

The office of the President, like money, can affect me even if I don't believe in it, even if I resist it. Barack can still drone me, and can still issue one or another executive order that will affect me, or through his bully pulpit inspire someone to do something, for good or evil. The President is very powerful, because people believe in the office of the presidency.

And whether or not I believe in money, other people do, and it makes the world go around. Or was that love. But if not enough people believe, it loses its power and ceases to be effective, it ceases to be "real."

So, too, with "Melekh Elyon," God as Exalted King, or God as President of the Multiverse. If we believe, we act accordingly, and the Office of God has a lot of power. If no one believes, then most of that power is not exercised.

You don't feel the ethical imperatives that come from the idea of God, you don't have the divine backing of the mitzvot, you don't have any greater power that cares, pays attention, feels your pain or remembers you. Much of God's power for good (or perhaps for evil) in the world depends on your belief.

As one philosopher wrote, "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions" (Marx, [Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction](#) (1843)).

The same notion of the "power through belief" would apply to "false gods" and false ideologies and false rulers. Their power comes from the belief placed in them.

The answer of our sages is that we should believe in the God of Israel, which is beneficial, and not believe the false deities of other societies.

The sun will come up tomorrow, whether or not you believe God has anything to do with it. But today will **not** be Yom HaDin -- the Day of Judgment (part two) -- unless you believe.

So God is all made up, or, God has full effect **only** if you believe; either way, for any practical purpose, God is what we call "all in your head."

You can think, God is not "real." But it is worse than that. Not only is "President" Obama not real, but if you think about it, the man *himself* is not so real. That is, the man I once almost knew does not exist. Over the years, most of the 30 trillion cells of his body, and the 40 trillion symbiont cells living inside or on him, have died and been replaced. Almost every night he has gone to sleep and re-configured his brain structure and sorted, deleted and created memories.

If I replaced every part of my 1973 Mercedes one by one with new parts, am I still driving the same car? If you replace every cell, and replace some of the parts, and change the memories, is it still the "same" person?

And of course, what holds for Barack Obama holds for you. And me. If you knew me 30 years ago, the only part that is completely the same is the filling in my right molar.

The notion of the continuity of personhood is an illusion, a mental construct, an imposition on reality by our imagination.

So now, not only is God not "real," which was bad enough, but you are not "real" either, if by "you" we mean the same person over a period of time. And your money is not real.

So much for that.

Now I will tell you why God is **more** than an idea, more than a mental construct.

God is “real” *more* than matter and energy in the universe are real.

This philosophical or theological assertion is based, of all things, on a Marxist -- or materialist -- understanding of the world. Here’s what I mean.

Karl Marx explained that what we call “culture” is merely an emanation, or artifact, or superstructure, of the underlying class conflict -- and that conflict is based essentially in a material reality.

Marx said,

The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.

The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas.

(Marx, [German Ideology](#) (1845)).

That is, our “ideas” and “social constructs” and “culture” and “institutions,” while only “existing in our heads,” in another sense are actually reflections of the material structure of the world.

Take the case of our President: Consider the many non-human species that have a Queen Bee, or Alpha male, or Lion King, or some other

individual who serves as the leader or “President” of the group. This status is recognized only because others acquiesce, but is based on **more** than culture, it reflects some reality of their biology and environment; it reflects the material world.

The Queen Bee, the Lion King are, as it turns out, real “things” that exists in “nature.” It is both “made up” completely by people, projected from our own ideas, and at the same time expressing something real in the life of the animals and real in the material world.

This should not be taken as endorsement for **any** “rights” of kings or rulers, let alone “divine” rights among humans. We have this very magic thing, this wondrous illusion, called “Free Will” which means we don’t have to accept any particular claim of other people to exploit, oppress or direct us. We have the ability to determine our own destiny. And, oddly, we have this God, Melekh Elyon, who outranks the Earthly King, the Melekh Evyon.

[See the poem in Mahzor Lev Shalem, p. 155.]

Explore and understand as deeply as you can the way the world works, social institutions and the notion of the continuity of personhood. And reject falsehood; recognize illusion and delusion.

But the only way your world is going to make sense is if you assume the existence and continuity of identity of yourself and other people, accept the force of social constructs -- including your power to modify them -- and the reality of Melekh Elyon, God as Exalted King.

As I stressed in my talk last year [2015] on Rosh HaShana, the essential theology of Israel is the rejection of false gods.

Rabbi Yohanan, quoted in the Talmud (Meg 13a) said,

...Whoever rejects idolatry is called a Jew

....שכל הכופר בע"ז נקרא יהודי....

And as Rabbi Hiyya explained (J. Hagiga 7:1), the God of Israel prefers that you believe in **no God** rather than embrace false gods, just as long as you follow the teachings of love, law and wisdom promoted through the mitzva system. If the People of Israel live according to that Torah, that Teaching, we will eventually find our way back to the God of Israel.

God will judge you on this Day of Judgment, and it will be more beneficial for you and me if you accept that construct. And to the extent that God's power depends on your recognition of the Power of the Office, I'm campaigning for you to vote for Adonai for the Office of God.

END