

Parshat Yitro
February 11, 2012
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Do you think God was pleased that the Giants won the Superbowl?

Silly question, no? God has better things to do than worry about who wins a football game – but then again, most of us have better things to do than worry about who wins a football game – yet what were you doing last Sunday evening?

One of our members shared the following joke with me: “Tom Brady, the quarterback of the New England Patriots dies and stands before God about to enter the pearly gates. God welcomes him and acknowledges that as one of the best quarterbacks ever to play the game he certainly has earned not only a place in the Football Hall of Fame, but in heaven. God shows him the house that has been reserved for him – a palatial affair – with 27 rooms, all the amenities, swimming pool – the works – Tom Brady is appreciative, but can’t help but notice the much larger and significantly more lavish home that is right next to his. Curious as to who lives in that home – Brady can’t help but sneak a peak and to his dismay he sees that the walls are covered in Tim Tebow paraphernalia – Tim Tebow jerseys, Tim Tebow posters, everything Tim Tebow.

Unable to restrain himself, Tom Brady says to God – “are you kidding me? I can’t believe the attention this guy is getting – he is not one bit the quarterback I was – his career is nothing compared to mine – how many Superbowls has he played in? And he gets a house so much bigger than mine?” To which God replies – “Oh, that’s not Tim Tebow’s house, that’s My house!”

Now – if you don’t know who Tim Tebow is – he is currently the quarterback of the Denver Broncos, he played college football at the University of Florida, winning the Heisman trophy and has quickly built up a fan base as one of the most popular players in the NFL but in addition to his football skills, is also known for his frequent demonstrations of his religious devotion. Kneeling and giving thanks to God after every touchdown, wearing quotes from the New Testament on his face during games and even created something that is known as “Tebowing” – a form of kneeling and giving thanks to God that has spread across the globe.

So how do you feel about “Tebowing” – in the joke, God seems to be a great fan. But really, all those comments after the game about thanking the Lord – does God really care who wins a football game?

The truth is – that my question really misses the point. When people complain that giving God credit for your victory means He also must take responsibility for the other teams defeat – as in God clearly loves the Giants more than he loves the Patriots. These raise interesting theology problems – but they miss the point.

When someone gets up to accept an Oscar, an Academy Award or a Grammy and says something to the effect: “I want to thank my wife without whom this award would not be possible.” Or, “If it wasn’t for my husband I wouldn’t be standing here today...” Nobody analyzes the

situation to ask – “do you think he really believes that his wife was responsible for this award, or that her husband was critical to his success as an actor?” No – people immediately accept the comment for what it is meant to be – an expression of relationship at a critical moment in their life and acknowledging that relationship as one of the most important things in their life.

When I visit someone in the hospital who is recovering from injuries sustained in a car accident and they say to me, “rabbi, God was good to me, I could have been killed in this accident. My car was totaled!” I don’t sit down and challenge the theology of their comment- “Do you really think God was good to you? Because, if you do, what am I supposed to say to the widow in the shiva house that I am going to right from the hospital whose husband was killed in a car accident – that God was not good to her?” No – I don’t discuss theology at that particular moment – but I recognize the comment for what it is – a statement of relationship at a critical juncture in their life.

What is the correct place of God and theology in the life and conversation of contemporary Americans? Interesting question, one that Mitt Romney hasn’t quite figured out yet – but much too large a topic for me to tackle in a sermon. What is the correct place of God and theology in the life and conversation of contemporary Jews? Also an interesting question – but I am afraid it is still too big for me to take on this morning. So let me take a bite out of just part of it.

Some people are clearly more comfortable with God talk than others. Tim Tebow is clearly one of those who is comfortable with God talk. We all have met people who like to sprinkle their conversation with expressions like: praise the Lord,” or “all glory to God!” In religious circles it is not unusual to hear people say, “*baruch hashem*,” or “*todah l’el*” – “thank God” or “with God’s help”. Our Muslim friends sprinkle their conversations with expressions of *insch alla!*”

And this has led me to an interesting point that I first learned in connection with my study of this weeks Torah portion - *Parshat Yitro* which contains and deals with the Ten Commandments or the *Aseret Hadibrot* as they are called in Hebrew.

The second of the Ten Commandments is: *lo yiyeh l’cha elohim acheyrim al panai* – “You shall have no other gods besides Me.” Everett Fox in his translation renders this: “You are not to have any other gods before my presence.” The new JPS translates this: “You shall have no other gods beside me.”

What does this mean? What is the difference between “You shall have no other gods **BESIDE** Me.” and “You shall have no other gods **BESIDES** Me.”

Translation is a tricky business. Where does the confusion come from? *Al panai* - can mean both, it is a question of context. And it is a subject of debate whether the original intent was to prohibit any other gods – period; or to prohibit any other gods on the same level of Adonai. But in time this became moot as Judaism developed became understood as prohibition against any other gods - period.

This understanding led to a question by Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk, known as the Kotzker Rebbe who lived at the beginning of the 19th century. Rabbi Mendel cited the verse from Psalm 81:10 *lo yiyeh b’cha eyl zar* “You shall have no strange god.” The Kotzker rebbe asks what need is there for this verse? Since there is nothing in the Bible that is superfluous, every word having

been carefully chosen by God - and since we just learned in the 10 commandments the prohibition against other gods - what need is there for this verse in psalms prohibiting "strange gods"?

And then the Kotzker proceeds to answer his own question: "We need them both. ***The verse in the 10 Commandments teaches the prohibition against strange gods. The verse in Psalms teaches us the prohibition against making God a stranger.***"

Lo yiyeh lecha elohim acheyrim - You shall have no strange gods
Lo yiyeh b'cha eyl zar - You shall not make God a stranger

I like the Kotzker's understanding of these verses and what's more, I would suggest to you that we modern Jews have succeeded in accepting the first and failed in observing the second - and herein lies the core of our God dilemma.

There are few Jews sitting here who believe that there are "other gods" - success! But most Jews have a strange relationship with the one God - failure! There is an exercise I like to do with High Schoolers - I ask them "if they were accused of being a Jew, would there be enough evidence to convict them?" If someone hired a detective to follow you around on your daily routine - how long would it take for that detective to compile sufficient evidence to prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that you are Jewish?

All contemporary studies show that we Jews overwhelmingly believe in God. When asked in survey's the numbers are astounding - but it is a strange belief and a strange relationship that does not seem to manifest itself in any outward expression.

How many here believe in God? – Don't raise your hands! I believe that if I did ask you to raise your hands - the results would be overwhelmingly in the affirmative. (Whether you do or you don't – it probably would be the smart thing to do sitting here in shul!)

But if I asked you to give me some tangible expression of that belief - something that you do or say, ways that you behave that are the direct and conscious product of that belief - many would begin to stammer and stutter. If I were to hire a detective to follow all those who raised their hands affirming a belief in God and asked that detective to bring me proof, hard evidence of said belief - how long would it take someone following you around to compile sufficient proof of your beliefs? We do indeed have, in the words of the Kotzker Rebbe, a strange relationship with God.

So when Tim Tebow expresses his gratitude to God following a touchdown –I feel no need to criticize him at all – in fact I admire the relationship that animates such an expression.

But what am I to do with you? What are the odds that if one of your children won the Superbowl, or an Oscar or a Nobel Prize – that they would step to the podium and say: "I want to begin by expressing my gratitude to God..." What are we to do with all of these Jews who affirm a belief in God (good news) and then proceed to live their life as if there is no God (bad news)?

Well - I guess we have two choices. We could become consistent in one of two ways.

Recognizing that our day to day lives are indeed overly void of God - we could fess up and admit we don't really believe in God. Or, we could admit that our lives are not sufficiently representative of our beliefs and find ways to make our day to day lives more a product of our true beliefs. Guess which one I recommend. Guess which one I want to talk to you about.

So, for all of those who affirm that you believe in God, yet admit that has not yet translated itself into concrete expressions of that belief and faith - what should you do? How does one make God a part of his/her life?

Well, that indeed is a question that is worth an extended conversation, it could be the subject of a course - it certainly is a little much to deal with in the remaining few minutes I have in this *drasha*. But that won't stop me from trying.

Let me put it to you this way: How would you go about making anyone a part of your life? Say your husband or wife, your boyfriend or girlfriend were going away on an extended trip and you want to make sure that you don't forget them. What are the things that you could do to keep them as a part of your life - so that they don't become a stranger to you?

Place a picture in your room, on your desk

Write letters, email, speak to them as often as possible on the phone – we love Skyping with our grandchildren in Philadelphia between visits.

Re-read old letters, look at old pictures - to keep them fresh in your mind and make them feel close

Do things you know they would like you to do, or that you used to do together - and by doing them feel their presence – a lot of people use this to keep a relationship with a loved one who has passed away.

Visit them as often as possible – here again people tell me that visits to the cemetery help them maintain a relationship with a departed loved one.

Think about them as much as possible

Well, if you think about it - much of Jewish life and much of Jewish ritual is doing precisely those things in an attempt to help you create a relationship with God, in an attempt to make sure that God does not become a stranger in your life.

Place a picture in your room, on your desk: tefillin, tallit, kippa, shabbat candles - these are the Jewish version of placing a picture of God before us. Since God cannot be seen - we have no photographs - but these wonderful rituals make God feel very near and very present.

Write letters, send email, phone often: prayer is our love letters to God. Praying is the time we set aside to speak to God. It is a critical piece in maintaining the vitality of our relationship with God. If you are lonely - tell God, if you miss God in your life- tell Him. If you are angry and feel God has not treated you fairly - tell Her. A relationship thrives on communication. A relationship can survive anger and abuse - it can survive almost everything - but it cannot survive indifference.

Re-read old letters - this is why we study Torah. The Torah is God's love letter to us. As we read

and study God's words we are reminded of God and feel God's presence and we know that God is once again a part of our lives.

Do things you know God would like you to do - we call them Mitzvot. Every time you make a *motzei*, every time you say a *bracha* - every time you observe a - *mitzvah* - God becomes a part of our lives.

Visit God as often as possible - come to synagogue, say the *shma* when you wake up in the morning and the last thing at night - observe Shabbat - these are ways that we place ourselves in God's presence - and feel God's presence daily.

What a funny people we are. We do none of these things, or very few of them, and then we blame God for not being a part of our lives. "I don't know rabbi - I just don't feel God's presence in my life - what is wrong with Judaism?"

God is there - we can choose to make Him friend or stranger. I know which one Tim Tebow chose - which will you choose?