

God of the Empty Space

(Beginning of Beethoven's 9th symphony, 1st movement is heard)

It was in the winter of 1973, sometime in February or March; when I first heard that music performed live. I was already a lover of classical music, a love cultivated from an early age – a gift to me from my father. It was my freshman year at the University of Pittsburgh. I had become friends with a young woman, Karen. She was a native of Pittsburgh and her family owned a season subscription to the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Karen, knowing I would enjoy hearing the orchestra, invited me to attend a concert with her. The program was just two pieces, Shubert's Unfinished Symphony, and Beethoven's 9th. I was familiar with both from recordings, but had never heard either in a live concert. It was a religious experience.

I had gone with my dad numerous times to hear the Philadelphia Orchestra, so the thrill was not simply in hearing a live orchestra. No, it was listening to that incredible Beethoven composition, written when he was already deaf, that made me think that there was indeed a God. It was the wispy, tentative notes that open the first movement, those you just heard, those staccato, almost rushed notes of the second movement, the leisurely pace of the third and the magnificent blending of voice and instrument of the fourth. I heard that music, performed by a group of first rate musicians and I cried. I just knew that there had to be a God. Notes like those could only have come from God, been inspired by God, because they expressed the magnificence of God.

Beethoven was merely God's conduit for transmitting this creation of beauty to humanity.

Such was my thought at 18 years old.

But - at 18 one only listens to half of what is happening. At 18, one is caught up in plunging into the cacophony of life, not sorting it out. So at 18 I heard God in Beethoven's notes. That is what most of us do. We hear God in the noise of life.

We hear the sound of a songbird calling to its mate, we think there is God. When we hear the laughter of children playing, we think there is God. When we listen to words of wisdom teaching us an insight, we think there is God. When we listen to the sound of ocean waves lapping softly against the shore, we think there is God. When we hear the soft sound of a summer breeze rustling through the leaves of a tree, we think there is God.

But what do we think when we hear the screech of the vulture, circling its prey about to feed, is that God? What about the scream of a child suffering in pain from cancer, is that God? What about words of venomous hate coming from a Hitler, a bin Laden, a member of the KKK or Aryan Nation, is that God? Or how about the sounds of a tsunami crashing upon the shore, or the winds of a tornado ripping trees from their roots, is that God?

The answers we arrive at take us in some interesting directions. Some of us only hear God in the beautiful sounds, and ascribe the harsh sounds to the ungodly. God cannot possibly be connected with what we consider evil, unpleasant, violent or deadly. God is merely the goodness in life, that which is

ethical and pure. Those who believe this consider it our responsibility to keep the purity of God's realm clean of impurity. That is, essentially, the theology of the book of Leviticus. God's ability to be present in our lives, in our world is dependent upon the elimination of impurities, be they the physical impurity of disease and the unclean or moral impurity. Our lives are driven by the need to be on guard for impurity. The harsh noise is to be eliminated.

Some, however, do hear God in the violent and difficult sounds. But what we hear is God's means to punish us. If our child is ill, afflicted with some disease, God is punishing us, or at the least, testing us. A hurricane becomes a way to exercise God's anger against a society that has turned against God's law; a tsunami punishment for a godless society. This is the mode of thinking that enables some Jews to claim that the Shoah is God's punishment of Jews for not assiduously performing the mitzvot. For these people, the noise of the world is interpreted as representing God's pleasure or anger with us. So we modify our behavior based upon the sound we hear and the desired response we wish to provoke.

Whether it is the person who only hears God in the good or the one who hears the bad as God's punishment; either person is relating to physical manifestations and therefore to how God is seemingly physically affecting their life at a given moment. There are problems with this. When we become so wrapped up in perceiving God through physical action; we end up focusing only on the external world. We ignore paths of spirituality that can lead us to deeper places, to examining the less obvious, the hidden meanings. As a result, we fall

into an egocentric relationship with God. How many times have we heard the football player tell the reporter that he scored the winning touchdown because it was God's will? How many times have we heard someone wonder why God was punishing them with infirmity, with financial hardship, with broken relationships? When we only sense God through the physical happenings around us, then we expect God to be our cosmic major domo, to fetch and do for us, to respond to our problems and with whom we are displeased when He fails to perform.

Yes, it does seem so gracious, so humble when we hear someone attribute their success to God, but what does the opposite mean? Is failure a personal responsibility, or an arbitrary act of God? In the end, all we are saying is that the world is all about me. What is most important is my pleasure, my well being, my success. We see life as a game of gaining and losing, with God as the arbitrary referee with whom we are constantly pleading. It is Kohellet (Ecclesiastes) who wrote, "Wisdom, knowledge, and joy are given to the one God favors. To the one God does not favor, God gives the anguish of gaining and getting – and giving away to someone else whom God does favor." (2:26)

If we are only paying attention to the noise of life, more often than not we end up sharing Kohellet's perspective. Judaism wrestles with this notion, that God is simply the cosmic umpire, whimsically calling the balls and strikes of life. Our tradition looks for a more complete way to understand God, to fathom how God and humanity are intertwined.

There is a story from the Talmud, an aggadah, that I told you last year on Yom Kippur. Moses goes up to heaven to consult with God and finds God

adding little crowns and decorations to some of the letters of the Torah. If you look into a Torah scroll, you would notice these crowns on several of the letters. Moses asks God why God is doing this. God responds that at some point in the future, there will be a great teacher named Akiba ben Yosef, who will interpret Torah to such a fine degree that he will even find meaning in these crowns added to the letters of the Torah. Moses asks if he can see such a person. God tells Moses to turn around, and he finds himself in the back of a classroom, many years in his future. The classroom is filled with students. In the front is Rabbi Akiba conducting a Torah discussion. Moses is distressed because he does not understand one idea or one word of what is being discussed. Finally one of the students asks Akiba how he knows a certain point to be true. Akiba responds, "We know this from the Torah of Moses." Moses immediately feels better and is returned to God's presence. Moses then asks God if he could see what the reward of such a great teacher will be. God sends Moses back to the future and to his horror, he witnesses Akiba's torture and death by hands of the Romans. Akiba is flayed; literally turned into dog meat. Moses, in shock asks God, "how can this be the reward for such a great teacher?" To which God responds, "Be silent. Thus I have decreed."

The story is horrifying because of God's seeming capriciousness. We do not understand how a great man like Akiba should be subjected to a tortuous death. All of the actions in the story end up seeming so absolutely without meaning. What good is all of Akiba's teaching if this is his reward? What good

are Moses' efforts as well if it leads to Akiba's meaningless death? By the end of this Talmudic piece, we are left with nothing but despair.

It is clear that our Talmudic sages are wrestling with the same kinds of theological issues that we do. How to reconcile God with the violence and tragedy in the world? In particular, for the Jewish people, at a time when Jews demonstrated deep devotion to learning and to Torah, why is it that the Roman oppression reaches its zenith? Why is God allowing this to happen?

We will not find the answers if we listen only to the noise of life. If we only pay attention to the noise, we understand very little. It is Maimonides who really begins to express thoughts about God in this way. Maimonides teaches that you cannot make any positive statement about God other than "God is." You can only define God through negative statements, for example God has no material form. God, teaches Maimonides, has no physical attributes. They are only our language for expressing how we are experiencing God.

I agree with Maimonides. We cannot begin to understand God through physical expression. We have to look elsewhere.

During our Tikkun L'eil Shavuot, this past June, Steve Mindlin gave a presentation on a particular piece of choral music he performed a number of years ago. During this presentation he pointed out the following: music is not simply shaped by the notes, but by the spaces between the notes. Think of the opening to the Beethoven symphony you heard a few minutes ago. Without the spaces between the notes, they have no shape, no context, no distinctiveness. It

is the existence of a span of nothingness that allows the something to gain meaning.

To fully understand God, we must look into the seemingly empty spaces of life as much as in the “noise.” We ignore the spaces, they seem to contain nothing. Yet that is where we will find God. The placement and length of the empty spaces gives shape to the meaning of our lives. There is a hint of this in the Talmudic story about Akiba.

God tells Moses that Akiba will find meaning in the crowns and decorations found on the letters of the Torah. The Hebrew words for crowns and decorations are “kotzim” and “talin.” Kotzim are sharp points. Talin is a word that refers to sensual curves. The kotzim are irritants, nudging you to look for something more. The talin are also a clue to look further, but instead of as an irritant, they are a sensual invitation. Their presence is an invitation to not only look for meaning in the letters of the Torah, but to look in the spaces between the letters as well! Further, when Moses questions Akiba’s fate, God commands Moses to “be silent, thus I have decreed.” We, and Moses I am sure, focus on the second clause. But what if the first clause, the command to “be silent” is supposed to be our focus? What if God is commanding Moses to focus on the silence, not the noise, if he really wants to begin the journey to understanding the fullness of life?

The power of stillness is at the center of a key piece of our High Holiday liturgy, the Untaneh Tokef. “Let us proclaim the sacred power of this day” the prayer begins, “it is awesome and full of dread.” Later there is a recitation of the

possible fates that await all of us, that it will be decreed who lives and prospers and who dies and by what means. The closing lines to Untaneh Tokef are these: “utshuvah, utfilah, utzdakah ma'avirin et ro'a hagzeirah,” which we translate as “Repentance, prayer and charity (or justice), temper judgments severe decree.” The prayer is confusing as it seems to assert a fatalistic theology in which we have so little control. Yet, if that is true, how can repentance, prayer and charity mitigate any decree?

I believe, that the beginning to fathoming Untaneh Tokef lies in the words, “uvshofar gadol yitaka, v'kol d'mamah dakah yishama,” “the great shofar is sounded, the still small voice is heard.” Here, we are presented with the great contrast; the great blast of the shofar and the stillness in which we strain to hear a small voice. Our natural tendency is to focus on the blast and not the intervening stillness. Notice also, that it is the action of a human who creates the noise that otherwise interrupts the natural stillness of God's presence.

The purpose of this particular line of liturgy is to mirror the experience of Elijah the prophet, who is forced to flee into the wilderness after demonstrating God's power over the false prophets of Ba'al. Despite his devotion to God, Elijah's life is now in danger, and he is in despair. Not understanding how he could be thus rewarded for his devotion, Elijah comes to a cave on a mountain in the wilderness and asks God to end his life. Here is what the book of I Kings tells us happens next:

“And behold Adonai passed by and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before Adonai; but Adonai was not in

the wind. And after the wind an earthquake, but Adonai was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire, but Adonai was not in the fire. And after the fire a still small voice. And so it was, when Elijah heard it that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave. And behold, there came a voice to him and said, ‘What are you doing here, Elijah?’”

Elijah then returns to his life’s work of teaching the people of Israel.

What happened in that moment? It was the stillness that focused Elijah. Once he eliminated the noise, Elijah is able to look into himself and understand that his life is about much more than himself. Rather than despair at the seeming randomness of life, he gains a perspective on how his life is connected to all life. He quiets the noise of ego and is able to return to the world and continue his life’s work.

That is exactly what we are called to do during Untaneh Tokef. We must still the human noise that distracts us from looking into the stillness. When we hear the litany of fates, who will live and who will die, who will be poor and who will prosper, we are beckoned to give up our attempts to control all aspects of life, for just a few moments to acknowledge our powerlessness, and to say, “OK God, I am hear, quiet and ready. I am turning to you and I want to find you. I am willing to put ‘me’ aside and to open myself to Your fullness – the fullness of life.”

And after we are done despairing over our lives, after we are done feeling triumphant about any personal victories, after we are willing to tune out the noise

and to look into the stillness, an answer comes, “Utshuvah, utfilah, utzdakah tempers judgment’s severe decree.”

T’shuvah – translated as repentance, yet its fuller meaning is “to turn.” We need to turn away from hearing only the notes, the noise – the part of life that we humans create, and turn to look into the stillness, the seemingly empty spaces if we wish to connect to God.

T’fillah – prayer, but the meaning of the verb “lehitpaleil” is not “to pray” but “to judge oneself.” Having turned from the noise, we free ourselves to look into ourselves, to judge ourselves and to free ourselves from bondage to ego and to self.

Tzedakah – charity, but in truth, righteousness. Having turned from the noise, having prayed in a way that exposes our souls, we can be agents of righteousness. Torah does nothing else if not beckoning us to pursue righteousness, justice. **We can give more of ourselves by being less full of ourselves.**

Putting God at the center of our lives is not done by attributing all of our personal trials and successes to God’s special attention to our lives. We place God at the center of our lives when we pay special attention to the welfare of our family, our friends, and our neighbors. A merchant once came to Rabbi Meir and complained of another merchant who had opened his shop right next door to him. “You seem to think,” said the rabbi, “that it is your shop that supports you, and are setting your heart upon it instead of on God who is your support. But perhaps you do not know where God lives? It is written, ‘Love your neighbor as

yourself, I am God.' This means, 'You shall want for your neighbor what he needs, just as you do for yourself – and therein you will find God.'"

The great mystic Isaac Luria taught this about creation. At the beginning, God's presence filled every corner of the universe. Then God, in order to make room for creation, withdrew from an area of space, creating the empty space. From a single divine point in the center of that empty space, creation sprang forth. All of it, everything there is, therefore exists within God.

It is the empty space that reminds us of what God did in order to begin the act of creation. It is the empty space that reminds us of God's presence. It is through the empty space that we can discern the still, small voice that is the counter balance to human noise. Our awareness of stillness, leads us on a path that opens our hearts to each other, to genuine caring for each other. The path for gaining this awareness is expressed Jewishly through the concepts of t'shuvah, t'fillah and tzedakah. When we travel this Jewish path, we are able to do for our neighbor as we do for ourselves. When we do this, we are in fact bringing the noise into just the right balance with the silence and creating beautiful music – the music of our lives.

At the close of his 9th symphony, Beethoven brings all the elements together, solo voice, choral voice, instrument, pauses. He uses all of this to give life to a set of words, a thought, "All men will become brothers, under Your gentle wing." The music reaches a climactic crescendo, and then abruptly comes to a halt, creating an opportunity of silence. Tonight, this Kol Nidrei, I would like you to think about one thing. What will be your response to the silence?

(Closing bars of 9th symphony)