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Parashat Vayera

Faith in the Appearance of God

I had a moving conversation yesterday with two beloved members of our congregation. We talked about life and health and aging and death. When we found our way to the topic of the afterlife, one of them said with a smile: "When someone who's died taps me on the shoulder and says 'I'm still here,' then I'll believe it."

We had a good laugh and moved on, but the image stayed with me. It brought to mind a memory from my 7th grade Sunday School class back in Roanoke, Virginia. My teacher was Marci Brumberg, who ran my our religious school and, believe it or not, *still* runs it today. She once asked our class: "What would it take for you to believe in God?" It was a writing assignment, if I recall correctly, and my memory is that I tried to imagine something similar to our friend's speculation about a ghost tapping him on the shoulder, something seemingly impossible. I still have a mental image today of what I thought about back then: a tree growing inside, a tree that transforms into a large animal and speaks in a human tongue.

I don't know how familiar I was at that time with this week's *parashah*, but there might have been at least some residual influence.

Our Torah portion opens וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֹנֵי מַמְרֵא, "And the Eternal appeared to [Abraham] at the terebinths of Mamre" (Gen. 18:1). The last time God appeared to Abraham—when he and Sarah first arrived in Canaan—was also at terebinth (Gen. 12:6-7), which is a Mediterranean tree. The first terebinth was at a place called Moreh, and at the end of this week's *parashah*—when Abraham nearly sacrifices Isaac on the similarly-named Mount Moriah—he renames the place "the Eternal will see" because, we are told, "on the Eternal's mountain he will appear" (Gen. 22:14). There is some relationship, it seems, between trees and the appearance of God. So I wasn't too far off in my 13-year-old imagination.

The problem, of course, is that if I'm waiting for the manifestation of God in a tree or even a bush, burning or otherwise, I'm bound to be disappointed. If God ever really showed up on earth like that—and historically speaking, I'm confident "he" didn't—then it hasn't happened in a very long time, and it's not going to happen again.

Fortunately for us—the Torah's marvelous stories notwithstanding—Judaism never asks us to expect God to appear. Not physically, anyway.

The Rabbis were keenly aware that God did not and would not show up for them. Their personal experience, the Greek and Roman philosophy to which they were exposed, and the ongoing evolution of Jewish theology all aligned on this point. As Batya Hefter has written about Rabbinic stories and legends, "we find a transition from the prophetic relationship, to one which is based on the Oral Law: in other words, from a revealed God to the hidden God, from the God who makes His will and presence

known, to the God whose will and presence must be sought out."[1] As I see it, the Rabbis developed a profound understanding that God appears in relationships—relationships with texts and ideas, relationships between people (living and dead), relationships with the natural world, and relationships with ourselves and the spiritual sides of human life and Creation writ large. They expressed these ideas in poetry and prayer, story and song—creative endeavors in which our people have remained soulfully engaged for thousands of years.

Our sage saw the same world we do. They saw a world that was painfully and tragically broken, torn asunder by senseless violence and radically reoriented through widespread destruction and dislocation. And they saw a world suffused with hope, a world in which kindness and dedication and diligence and compassion could be found in every home and every heart. This is the world that the Rabbis taught us deserves 100 blessings a day.[2] And each one of these blessings, in the world-changing formulation of the Rabbis, contains one crucial, powerful, paradigm-shifting word: You.

Baruch Atah, Adonai, we say again and again—blessed are *You*, Eternal One. We hear ourselves addressing the same God who appeared to Abraham and Sarah, the same God who accompanied our martyrs to their deaths, the same God who brought freedom and survival and wonder and discovery to countless generations of spiritual ancestors throughout the ages. Our relationship to the Eternal You is real—but it is also imagined. Our heritage of blessing conditions us to feel God where God cannot be felt, to assert קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְכָל־קֹרְאָיו, that "God is near to all who call out to God" (Ps. 145:18) even though our eyes can't see and our ears can't hear the divine.

Thus Eliana Light's beautiful song "in the silence."[3]

> when hagar called out to you in the desert,
> after being banished from her home
> her son in need of water, her heart about to break,
> feeling so dejected and alone
> you sent them an angel, who lifted them out of despair
> yes, you sent them an angel, lord,
> and i don't even know if you are there. …
>
> [And] at sinai, they[4] all stood together
> and heard your voice call from afar
> it was all so clear, and it was all so real,
> and here i'm left to wonder where you are

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[1] From "Three *Meshalim* of the King and His Daughter in Rabbinic Thought" in *Torah of the Mothers: Contemporary Jewish Women Read Classical Jewish Texts*, ed. Ora Wiskind-Elper and Susan A. Handelman (Urim Publications, 2000), p. 325.

[2] BT Menachot 43b. See further Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 7:14 and Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 46:3.

[3] Lyrics available: https://elianalight.bandcamp.com/album/s-ngs-ab-ut-g-d-2.

[4] The printed lyric is "we all stood together," though the recording says "they all stood together." There are a few other small variations between the printed and recorded words. Note that capitalization is in line with the author's presentation.

Addressing God as "you" while also wondering if God is there at all, Eliana Light gives new expression to Judaism's ancient yearning. "Are you in the still, small voice inside?" she asks, speaking at the same time with both faith and doubt. Like the Hebrews at Sinai, she agrees *naaseh v'nishma*, "We will do and then we will understand" (Ex. 24:7): We don't wait for God to appear to us; instead, we take the first steps into relationship with the divine.

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Around the same time my 7th-grade teacher asked me about my faith, I saw the classic George Burns film, *Oh God*, which humorously illustrates these same lessons. A simple man encounters God, played by the long-lived comedian, and tries to convince those around him that God's message is real. The film's climax takes place in a courtroom, where God himself takes the stand, swearing to tell the truth "so help me me." Just as in my own 7th-grade speculation, God performs impossible miracles; but still, the awestruck onlookers aren't convinced. The scene is a harsh but accurate reminder: Even *were* we were to see something completely impossible pass before our very eyes, we probably *still* wouldn't trust that we'd come into contact with God.

"Why is it so hard for you to believe?" God asks the courtroom. Is My physical existence any more improbable than your own?" He continues, "I know how hard it is in these times to have faith. But maybe if you could have the faith to start with, maybe the times would change. You could change them. Think about it."[5] Spoken like a true rabbi.

Where could such faith come from if not from evidence of God?

I believe faith comes from seeing myself as part of something bigger than me, from recognizing that I am unbelievably small and magnificently important at the same time. Faith comes through experiences of accompaniment as we encounter grief and wonder and disappointment and despair. Faith comes through opening ourselves to the wisdom of our ancestors, to the insights of children, to the indescribable harmonies of nature which we can marvelously shape into music and poetry and moments of simple, shared presence. Faith comes from seeing purpose in our actions, meaning in the world, significance of connection, and value in the choices we make. It's not about "believing in God" or accepting the Torah as a record of historical fact. It's about knowing נוֹרָאוֹת נַפְלֵיתִי, "I am awesomely and wondrously made" (Ps. 139:14), without lock-solid evidence to prove it. And it's about accepting, as our prayerbook says, that "doubting is but the forefront of faith."[6] Faith, by definition, is not certainty. It's much more potent and powerful than fact.

[5] The film can be seen online, and these quotes can be found here: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0076489/quotes/?item=qt0321063.
[6] *Mishkan T'filah*, p. 405, attributed to Kenneth L. Patton.

We can't wait to see miracles before we have faith. Rather, it's the other way around. Once we have faith, everywhere we look, we will see miracles. With that mindset, it's easy to say 100 blessings a day. In truth, it'd be hard not to.

"songs i sing for you, poems i weave for you, i long for you my soul," writes Eliana Light.[7] May our own songs bring us closer to the One for whom we long. May we draw strength from one another as a community of seekers joined in common quest for truth. And may our eyes behold miracles in every direction we look, seeing beneath the surface an ephemeral appearance of God.

[7] In "shadows." Available: https://elianalight.bandcamp.com/album/s-ngs-ab-ut-g-d-2.