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### **The Two Aspects of the Divine**

I wanted to focus on God this morning. Many Jews struggle to find a modern Jewish theology. We are seekers of an understanding of God that is spiritually enriching and intellectually credible.

Human beings are spiritual creatures. From our earliest days we have asked where did we come from? What is asked of me? Judaism, in modern times as in ancient times, should not leave us bereft of an answer to these questions!

The truth is that Judaism's theology is narrow but not at all monolithic. It is narrow in that it does not allow for a belief in 2 gods, 4 gods, human gods, moon gods, etc....you know the list! Judaism is very clear about this. But within Judaism's pure monotheism, there is a striking breadth of thought about divinity.

I know one rabbi who says that in Judaism you can believe in one God or fewer...just not more! He is right in that there are atheist, secular Jews. For these individuals, Judaism is a civilization and a culture filled with history, values, a strong sense of peoplehood, a commitment to Israel, and a way of life. Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan wrote the book that is famous now called – *Judaism as a Civilization*. And for many Jews it is this sense of being a people or a civilization that ties them to Judaism.

But when I say that we are not monolithic – I don't just mean that you can either believe in 1 God or fewer. I mean that within a belief in one God - we have a striking variety of understandings about that God. The Hebrew Bible itself is written over at least a thousand years of time, and you can sure believe that those writers had different perspectives on God. We have the writer of Job who teaches that God does not always reward the just versus the writer of Deuteronomy who thinks that God does. We have the writer of Ecclesiastes who struggles to discern what is the right way to live versus the writer of Genesis who felt that God communicates the divine wishes very clearly.

In addition to these biblical differences, we have 2000 years of rabbinic tradition that delves deeply, deeply into spiritual waters – not always aligning exactly with the Bible or with each other. The rabbinic perspective runs the gamut from very

mystical beliefs such as that the primary way to know God is through experiencing a sense of divinity to much more cerebral perspectives including the view that one can only really describe what God is not.

I do not say this to give the sense that anything goes or that there are so many views that none can be relevant to you. Rather if you are a spiritual seeker, I want to encourage you to enter into the dialogue with Judaism and our theologians and rabbis to help you find the theology that seems most life affirming and meaningful to you.

As I have studied different Jewish theological perspectives, certain ones have been enormously impactful in my life. Rabbi Art Green in his book *Ehyeh* combines aspects of mysticism with a very modern perspective. I find his book very enlightening. I adore Rabbi Lawrence Kushner's book *I'm God, You are Not*. It is about the life changing impact of putting God rather than ourselves at the center of our world.... We are fortunate to live in a time when we have access to so many amazing Jewish authors!

But today I want to share with you one rabbinic view that for 2 decades or so has been among the most significant in my life. I hope that for many of you it will be meaningful too. I have spoken about it before here, but I think it bears revisiting and elaborating on. There is so much to explore in it and we definitely won't cover it all.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, alav hashalom, was a leading Conservative rabbi. He studied under Rabbis Mordechai Kaplan and Abraham Joshua Heschel. He was the rabbi of a large Conservative congregation in California. He was an activist who helped found Mazon and Jewish World Watch. But he is also known as a Jewish theologian.

His perspective, as you will see, is deeply rooted in Jewish tradition, while at the same time moving us away from a supernatural, anthropomorphic God.

Schulweis suggests that one Jewish view is to think of God as having two aspects. He notes that we almost always use two words to describe God: Adonai and Elohim (or Eloheinu). Most of our prayers begin "Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu - blessed are you Adonai our God." Why don't we just say "Baruch ata Adonai" or "Baruch ata Eloheinu?" At the very end of Yom Kippur we will say 7 times – "Adonai hu ha'elohim – Adonai is God." Why do we need both ADONAI and

ELOHIM? Schulweis suggest that each of these stands for a different aspect of the ONE God.

The first side, and the one we probably do not emphasize enough, is the Elohim aspect. Elohim is the Hebrew word for God. This term, Schulweis maintains, refers to the side of God which is responsible for creation, for nature, and for natural laws. Genesis 1 (which we just read) does not use the word Adonai – only Elohim: *Bereshit bara Elohim* – when God began to create,” those are the first 3 words of the Torah. Over and over in Genesis chapter 1 we hear of Elohim creating.

Elohim is a very important part of divinity! It is this aspect that we thank for the regularity of the world – for a sun that shines on us every day, for water to drink, for bodies whose systems are so incredibly complex and amazing. Some of us understand Elohim as a force... of energy perhaps that runs through everything. For others Elohim is the ultimate thinker who consciously fashioned the laws and elements that allow the entire universe to exist. We do not have to completely understand Elohim to be grateful to Elohim for creation.

This aspect of God is seen in what we might call Judaism’s reality principle. The rabbis already centuries ago recognized that the world obeys certain natural laws. We cannot change them. In the Talmud tractate brachot, we are told not to pray for the sex of a child after the child has been conceived. Why? Because the sex of the child is already determined. Prayer will not change it. Similarly, we are not to pray for the dead to come back to us. We can pray for strength to deal with our grief, but the laws of nature that the world exists by tell us that the dead will not come back to us.

This reality principle not only teaches us to deal with the world as it is, but it wisely asserts that not everything in the world happens for a moral reason. In the Talmuch tractate Avoda Zara, it says “a man stole a measure of wheat and sowed it in the ground. The moral law says it should not flourish – it was stolen, but it will grow. “Olam keminhago nohaig – the world pursues its own course.” This is the nature of nature. Nature in other worlds is amoral. This is an important Jewish teaching for us to remember. It means that the arsonists’ fire that kills a small child does so because of the laws of physics...not the laws of morality. Nature is not a court of justice. Every event has a cause, but not every cause is morally intentioned.

Things happen over which we have no control. They are not the will of God but the nature of God who functions in the world as Elohim. We should have great sympathy for those who suffer because of the laws of nature, and we should not add to their burden by unfairly linking blame to their situation. Elohim is responsible for the wonderful gift of life, but also for the usually amoral timing of death.

Yet there is another side to God: the Adonai aspect. Yud hey vav heh – the 4 letter proper name of God which we do not pronounce but instead say Adonai- My Lord – when we see it – this name does not appear in the Torah until Genesis 2. It only comes into the religious picture once humans are created. Schulweis describes this side of God as the one that looks to humanity to be God's partner in the world. Within the world, God does give us many choices- there are things we CAN control. On Yom Kippur, the morning Torah portion says God set before us ways of living that allow us to be a blessing and ways of living that allow us to be a curse. It is up to us to act in a Godly or an un-Godly manner. Judaism looks at humanity as having a mission to help improve the world! THIS is the Jewish view of our purpose here. ... It is not to get into heaven, it is not to live without attachments, it is about trying to be a mensch and following the mitzvot - ....This holiness avenue is the Adonai aspect of God. Adonai teaches us that there are rights and wrongs. We hear it in the still clear voice within us and in our sacred texts. Humanity has the intellectual ability to strive to lead a holy, good life. When we do so, we are following Adonai.

This aspect of the divine teaches us that not everything is up to the laws of nature. We pray “baruch ata Adonai” because we recognize that often through prayer we take that which is given and seek to transform it. In Second Kings, King Hezekiah is told by the prophet Isaiah to prepare for death because he is about to die. God has said so. But Hezekiah refuses to accept a death sentence. Instead he prays for God's forgiveness. We are told that because he held onto his hope, God granted him additional years of life. It is important to remember that we do not always know how things will go. Even modern medicine cannot always predict. Hope should not die too much ahead of the patient. Hope and faith are not contrary to reality -we sometimes forget that. They can be very powerful tools for transforming ourselves and our world.

It is the Adonai aspect that is responsible for morality The kabbalists taught us the concept of tikkun olam – that we can help to repair the world. We often ask God to

fix things for which God has already given us the tools to do the repair. When we say that we are created betselem Elohim -in God's image – we are acknowledging that there is a part of God's transformative abilities in each of us.

There is a lovely teaching that points out that it is odd that the motzi praises God for bringing forth bread from the earth. I don't know about you, but I have never seen bread growing out of the earth! The Talmud records that the rabbis found this perplexing. Shouldn't we thank God for wheat instead? Judaism has prayers thanking God for fruit, for vegetables, ....but if you are going to sit down to a meal and there is a table full of food and there is bread at the table, the blessing that you say is the one thanking God for bread! Why would we do that when God does not even create bread?! It makes no sense! The rabbis ask the question -well, which is greater the work of God or the work of humanity? Rabbi Akiva says the work of humanity! Why? Because it represents humanity working WITH God as a partner. We take what God has given us and make sustenance out of it. God is thus fully expressed when the Elohim, nature, side and the Adonai side work together.

If we look at the High Holy Days we can see that each holiday elevates one of these 2 aspects. On Rosh Hashanah we highlight the Elohim side of divinity. The holiday gives thanks for the creation of our world and for a new year. On Yom Kippur we focus on the Adonai aspect of our world – putting more attention on ethics and on the ability to make amends.

We live with both of these realities. Two aspects of God -one encourages acceptance, the other transformation. One teaches that tragedies will happen, the other that there is always something that can be done after a tragedy. We may not be able to stop the hurricane and sometimes we cannot cure the cancer, but afterwards we can help the afflicted. We cannot stop the laws of the universe that make global warming possible, but we can alter our behavior to prevent it.

Schulweis suggests that one way to read the Shema is Listen O Israel, Adonai and Eloheinu both are one. Both the aspect of divinity that gives us a sense of holiness and right living and the part of divinity that creates our universe both are parts of a seamless unity that is greater than us. Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.