

*Wherever We PUT God In*  
–sermon for Beth-El, Fort Worth  
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One of the great Hasidic masters, Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, famously asked a learned man who happened to be visiting him, “Where does God dwell?” You or I might readily answer, “Everywhere.” The visitor put that more elegantly, alluding to the Psalms: “Is not the whole earth full of God’s glory?!” With a bit less sophistication, a child might say, “here in the sanctuary.” With a different but equally Jewish mind set someone might say, “in Jerusalem.” None of those is a bad answer. But the rebbe, aware not merely of non-believers, but of oppression, poverty, crime, war and suffering, of ... all the sins major and minor which this day calls to mind, had a better answer. “Where does God dwell? –Wherever we let Him in.”

From God we have *torah* and *mitzvot*, guidance for living. From God we also have free will. “Everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven” says the Talmud (Berachot 33b). If we choose to lie and cheat, to steal and hurt, to abuse or neglect our families, or the environment, God does not stop us. When people live, that is, as if there is no God, there might as well not be! So God dwells where we let God in.

My good friend, Rabbi Neil Gillman, just retired as the professor of Philosophy at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, recently provided a profound commentary on that. Where does God dwell? Not “wherever we let God in,” says Gillman, but “wherever we PUT God in.” He writes:

When our rabbinic ancestors determined that we should praise God for the miracles that occurred in post-biblical, Maccabean times (the Chanukah story), they put God into history. (Rabbis today) did the same when they created (prayers) to recite on Israeli Independence Day. In neither case was God's presence objectively verifiable. Both are examples of historiography, human attempts to read history, subjective, interpretive moments when we are invited to "see" God's presence in the world. But so was the narrative voice in Exodus 14:30-31 who made the leap from perceiving dead Egyptians on the banks of the sea to claiming that Israel "saw" God's mighty hand stretched out against Egypt.

Is it all just "spin"? Think of a more personal spiritual moment in your life—say the birth of a child or grandchild. Is it just biology and dumb luck? His seed reached hers, cells divided and redivided thousands and thousands of times over, and, *voilà*, a baby! If you are determined to be blase, you may succeed. If, on the other hand, you approach life with a sense of wonder, you will feel blessed. The same holds for bad times. In the concentration camps there were people who became utterly selfish and brutal, and those who tried to help one another. Sometimes it does take more than just letting God in. It may take will, and courage, but we must *put* God into the world. God and Torah are always possibilities, the *mitzvot* are available, "in your mind and your heart that you may do them," we just read in the *parashah*. There *is* an element of "spin," of historiography, of deciding how we want to regard life and the world. God dwells were *we put* God in.

In many ways, individual and communal, life throws moral quandaries at us. We can simply do what feels best, or we can, with the passion of piety, reach for *kedushah*, asking ourselves, and consulting with our sacred texts to help answer: what would God have us do?

Our whole society has been tearing itself apart for years over the issue of abortion. You have heard this all so often the broadest brush strokes should suffice. Some would simply say, “life is sacred; so abortion is murder.” Others—most Jews--say that because life is sacred the well-being of the potential mother counts, too. So if the mother’s health is in danger—ever her psychological health, most would agree--abortion should be allowed. When the question arises—not in the abstract but (it happens!) in one of our families, Torah is not to be treated as an inflexible rule-book. The whole process of interpreting Torah to apply to new challenges both in our individual lives and in our society is a process for injecting God into the decision-making process. A loving God does not care only about the child, or only about the mother. So the potential for safe and legal abortions needs to exist in society, without pretending—few if any women do!--that this is an inconsequential act.

One could go through the same line of thought for each of the end-of-life issues that bedevil us. We cannot, morally, write people off simply because they are old. Torah commands respect for all, and especially for our elders. But neither did anyone 3000 years ago, or 2000 or 1000--or a mere few generations ago!--have to decide whether a family, or ultimately a society, should keep someone suffering, or vegetating, indefinitely. They never dealt, either, with whether a family, or a society, should bankrupt itself saying “no expense is ever too great to keep

a person going.” Technology has changed the equations. The important principle, “life is sacred,” which should always be the beginning of the discussion, cannot be the end of the matter once you recognize, as Judaism does, that death is not life’s opposite, but merely life’s end. Compassion cannot mean torturing people until their bodies finally give out. God is there at the end, as at the beginning, of life. This rabbi’s reading of Torah is that God requires that we consult those whose lives will be impacted by our choices. And since we cannot always be conscious and sufficiently undrugged to speak for ourselves in time of crisis, we need to make our views known while we are well. Do we want so-called “heroic measures” taken if we can be kept alive but cannot be restored to reasonable quality-of-life? Appallingly to my mind, many a religious authority, including many Jews, jump in at that point to say quality of life is not a proper consideration. “Life is always holy; you are just looking for an excuse to save money.” No! If (as some would say) God loves us, or (as others would say) God *is* love, how could the quality of life not be relevant?! When we Jews say we do not believe in Hell, that a loving God would not torture people eternally after death, we mean it! So how could anyone argue, and in God’s name, yet, that lives which have become living hells must be preserved literally at all costs?!

Can’t I talk about something happier? How ‘bout world peace? We’re for it. (Remember you heard that here first!) Seriously, we *believe* in it! That is actually a bold statement of faith, for in all of human history there has never been a time when there was no war. The wolf lying down with the lamb, beating swords into plowshares, everyone sitting beneath

their vines and fig trees with none to make them afraid: these are religious ideals, messianic visions of a people determined to put God into history..

Putting God in means keeping that goal in mind and taking it to heart. Self-defense, I must sadly add, is also a Jewish value, explicitly authorized by the Torah. So I am not suggesting that the United States or other nations—Israel certainly included—have no right to challenge aggression. We must, for instance, challenge, and threaten, and impose sanctions on, Iran, whose leaders issue wild threats against both Israel and America. —And then refuse to come clean with the nuclear inspectors from the U.N. The prophet Jeremiah rightly condemns false prophets “who cry ‘peace! peace!’ when there is no peace.” (6:14 and 8:11)

No one in his right mind, and certainly no Jew after the Shoah, should join those who oppose any and every use of force. But, my friends, we cannot have it both ways, on the one hand proclaiming piously that we should “be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it,” and on the other hand condemning the American government for pressuring both Israel and the Arabs to make concrete gestures—including Israel not building more housing in occupied territory—to promote trust and restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

Is it likely to work? Your guess is as good as mine. Mine at the moment, frankly, is: No. Then why try? Because we are Jews, commanded to pursue peace. Because God dwells where we put God in. Peace will never be made if no one tries! If God dwells where we, as an expression of our millennial faith, put God in, how could we advocate peace every place *except eretz yisraeyl?!?*

What all these examples have in common is their lack of easy answers. If Judaism is to guide us, certainly in our personal lives, and then also in our world, we must ask when faced with such conundrums: What might God have us do?

On the holiest of days in this holiest of seasons, we would be worthy of God, worthy individually of forgiveness for our failings, worthy collectively of being regarded as a chosen people. We must let God in to our lives, as the Kotzker Rebbe put it, and—more boldly from a modern Jewish thinker—often we must *put* God in to our lives, our society and our world.

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Gillman in “Response,” Special Issue in Honor of Neil Gillman, *Conservative Judaism*, Fall/Winter, 2008-09, p. 199.

Kotzker Rebbe in Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim. Later Masters*, p. 277.