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What Do We Want From G-d?

On November 10, 1984 a great debate took place in New York City between two of the most well known Jewish personalities in the world. The event was widely covered and scrutinized by the press and the Jewish world. The following day, the New York Times reported the following:

“They attended the same Yeshiva high school in Brooklyn and grew up conversant with the sacred Jewish texts. Rabbi Meir Kahane, the founder of the Jewish Defense League, was elected in July to the Israeli Parliament on a platform calling for the expulsion of all Arabs from the country.

Mr. Alan Dershowitz, a professor of law at Harvard University, has defended Jewish activists in the Soviet Union and has worked to build bridges between Jews and non-Jews in the United States and Israel. The encounter was marked by fiery exchanges, biblical quotations and exhortations to the audience.”

These two men debated on many topics that night, not the least of which was the role G-d played in their respective lives. The radical Meir Kahane explained that G-d served as a rock that supported every decision, every instance and every action in his life. The equally fiery, albeit much more moderate thinking Alan Dershowitz, explained that he sought out a G-d who spoke to him at his own pace, a G-d who did not dominate every decision, and a G-d that allowed him to disagree with Torah principles when they were not applicable to his modern life.

So often we ask, what is it that G-d wants from us, and we debate the importance of ritual, mitzvot and the ethical principles that guide our daily lives. But, it is not that often that we delve into the question of what it is that we want from G-d. For the fundamentalist Kahane, it is a G-d who governs each and every facet of his life. For the liberal Dershowitz, G-d had to have a more circumspect role. Their differences illustrate that each of us may envision a different and ever-changing role for the Divine in our lives. At this time of year, and hopefully at various points in our lives, especially as we mature in years and become wiser with experience, we seek a “philosophy of life,” a formula, a calculus, that defines our personal relationships with the Almighty. While we all have different ways of achieving our spiritual goals, it appears to me that serious Reform Jews who are attuned to their Jewish identities seek G-d to play three major roles in their lives. First, they want G-d to provide meaning for their lives. Our lives are not biological accidents – they are not events in nature that lack any purpose. Secondly, they need G-d to endow their relationships with sanctity. Life is holy and as a holy people, and *am kadosh*, our relationships with those we love must be imbued with sparks of the Divine. Finally, G-d gives us hope in times of crisis, and clarity in a confused and uncertain world.

One of the most painful questions any one of us can ask ourselves as we mature in years is whether or not our life has any meaning. Is there spirituality in our existence? In the Book of Genesis we learn that interesting lesson in Hagar's yearning to bring G-d into her life. Hagar, you recall is portrayed as a simple hand maiden of Abraham and Sarah, but she is a misunderstood character. The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, provides a much deeper view into her background. Rashi teaches us that Hagar was a princess, the daughter of a Pharaoh. When Abraham and Sarah sojourned into Egypt, and Pharaoh met them, he was so impressed with their spirituality and connection to the Divine that he apprenticed his daughter, Hagar, to Sarah and Abraham to learn the ways of G-d. In Egypt, Pharaoh had the ability to give his daughter whatever she could dream – palaces, riches, slaves - all the treasures she desired. But, Pharaoh realized that to obtain spirituality and for Hagar to have an optimal relationship with G-d, she had to be removed from the luxuries of the royal family and be consigned to the care of Abraham and Sarah, even if she would be sent away to the wilderness. Only through Abraham and Sarah could Hagar develop a relationship with G-d based on spirituality, and not a meaningless existence based on materialism.

For all his faults, this particular Pharaoh knew what his daughter should want from G-d – a real relationship that provided her life with profound meaning. And Hagar agreed. She left Egypt with Abraham and Sarah because she too wanted to discover such a divine relationship. Perhaps we do not all have Hagar's dedication – or do not seek a relationship with G-d as she did. But at certain points in our lives each of our souls yearn for some sort of connection.

Rabbi David Fohrman, professor at Johns Hopkins University, relates the following two scenarios in describing how an individual seek meaning in life from faith. There is a man who has become very ill. He is not sure if he is going to survive his illness or not. As he drifts to sleep in his hospital bed he begins to speak to G-d quietly to himself. He asks G-d for help and to be with him. G-d comes to him and says, "My child I am here with you. I want you to know that I am very close to you now. As you drift into sleep, I shall stay by your side, and I shall not leave you. I feel your anguish, and I know how much you want to live. But I must tell you that now is the time I have chosen for you to end your stay on Earth. You cannot understand why, my child, but now is the time."

The man in this scenario succumbs to the end of life just like we all will one day. But as he experienced his final moments, he knew G-d was with him because the relationship he had with G-d was real in his mind. Throughout his life, he desired to have such a relationship with G-d, and now at the time when he needed G-d the most, G-d (at least in his mind) was right by his side.

Now imagine the second scenario. There is a man who has become very ill. He is not sure if he is going to survive his illness or not. As he drifts to sleep in his hospital bed he begins to speak to G-d quietly to himself. G-d responds to him, "You have not made yourself worthy of My becoming intimately involved in your affairs. The doctor who is operating on you is as competent as any. I shall leave your fate in his hands."

This harsh response from the Almighty represents the inconsistency of this man's relationship with G-d. He never requested that G-d give meaning to his days, he never sought such a relationship. And just like we would not rely on a simple acquaintance for a large favor as we

would a great friend, we should not expect that if we have not made G-d routinely real in our lives, that He will be there only in times of crises.

Not only do we need G-d to be real in our personal lives, but we need G-d to be real in our relationships with others. In the Zohar there is a mystical teaching about the soul of a husband and wife. It is taught that when two babies are born G-d takes a soul and splits it in half. And if we are fortunate as we progress through life, then the person we meet and choose to marry will be the one whose soul we originally split off from in heaven. And when both spouses die and go to heaven, the two souls reunite and once again form one soul.

This concept reminds us that meaningful relationships are never just physical, they are spiritual as well – and it is the spirit that lives on long after the bodies have returned to the soil. Even the most unobservant Jews realize that G-d's presence cannot be removed from a meaningful relationship. When a loved one dies, we seek out a rabbi and the prayers of our tradition. When a couple is married, both the bride and groom say “Blessed be the Lord our G-d who creates man and woman.” When a baby boy is born, a couple seeks out a *mohel* and recites: *Ashrei tivchar v'tikarev yishkon chatzeirecha* – Happy is he whom You choose and bring close that He may dwell in your presence.” And when a baby girl is born, the parents proclaim her Hebrew name and pray that the Torah leads her to perform acts of goodness.

There was once a rabbi who officiated at a wedding of a young couple named Eli and Tonia in Massachusetts. The rabbi had not heard from them in over ten years after wedding until one day they contacted him and let him know that they were getting divorced. They wanted to know if there was a ceremony they could perform, other than a *get* (a Jewish writ of divorce that did not interest them). They also felt that they did not want to formalize their split in a cold, impersonal and strange courtroom. So the rabbi decided with them that they would meet in the sanctuary of his synagogue and recite ritual prayers together. A couple of days later, the three of them gathered there and stood before the open ark, and, as the prayers of separation commenced, the two of them wept, as did the rabbi. At the end they held each other, and then the rabbi held each of them. They left the sanctuary separately, symbolic of beginning their independent lives. Later each of them sent the rabbi a note telling him how meaningful the ritual was to them.

Even in times of separation, our relationships mean more when they are endowed with spirituality. One of the things we clearly need from G-d is for Him to be with us in our relationships – with our parents, our siblings, our kids, our grandparents and everyone else in our worlds who give meaning to our lives. When a couple gets married we proclaim the sacred rite of *kiddushin*. *Kiddushin* is the Aramaic word for sanctification, but it also means separation. We ask G-d to sanctify the marriage of the couple, but we also ask that G-d separate them from all others, that He watch over them and care for them. Since we are so bold as to ask G-d to protect those who matter to us in our lives, how much more so should we commit ourselves to valuing, respecting and nurturing the relationships we share with others? Our relationships are sacred, and we must care for them accordingly.

As we embark on this High Holy Day season, our prayers offer us hope for the coming year. We pray that we will be sealed for a good year and that G-d will look with favor upon us. Each year we are given new hope, a new reason to reconnect spiritually, another opportunity to spend real time with our friends and family and, frankly, to hope – to hope for a promising year, for spiritual fulfillment and for deepened connections with those who mean everything to us. At this time of year we want G-d to give us hope.

This yearning is one that we learn from our Patriarch Jacob who had great hope that G-d would guide him faithfully through his journeys. After the dream of the ladder in which angels were ascending and descending from the heavens, Jacob awoke and proclaimed, “If G-d remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and gives me bread to eat and clothes to wear, and if I return safe to my father’s house, [then] the Lord shall be my G-d.” It may sound to the casual reader that Jacob was declaring a condition for his worship of G-d – that he would base his decision on bringing G-d into his life on whether G-d protected him or not. But our commentators teach us that Jacob’s real intent was to indicate that with G-d in his life he had real hope for the things he needed in life – namely food, shelter, strong family relationships, and a life in which “G-d remained with him.”

Jacob’s worship of G-d brought hope to his life. It allowed him to take journeys, both physically and spiritually, knowing that a layer of protection sheltered his every move. This is what we all pray for today. If we are going to live a life of faith, then we should require that G-d give us hope for the future – that tomorrow will be better than today – that each day will be endowed with greater meaning – that our maturity will be accompanied by heightened wisdom – and that G-d will recognize that no matter what may confront us, our hope is eternal and will not waver.

During the Holocaust the Polish poet Tadeusz Borowski, imprisoned in a Nazi death camp, was asked why he and his comrades did not end their own lives rather than allow the Nazi murderers to annihilate them. He responded in his own poetic fashion: “It is hope that keeps people from risking a revolt, paralyzes them into numb activity. It is hope that compels man to hold on to one more day of life, because that day may be the day of liberation.... We were taught never to give up on hope, and this is why today we perish in the gas chambers.”

Judaism is a religion of hope. Hope is our messianism – it is our belief that someday, somehow the problems that face us as individualized Jews, as members of the human race, will be resolved, that we will partner with our Creator in this holy endeavor, and we will look towards the heavens and envision brighter days just as Dr. Martin Luther King imagined when he proclaimed, “Mine eyes have seen the coming of the Lord.”

Perhaps it is ironic that we find G-d not only when we ask what G-d wants from us, but also when we look inwards and pose the question to ourselves – what do we want from G-d? We want a partnership grounded in holiness – a covenant based on spirituality so that our lives will have meaning, a way derived from the tradition of our people’s lives. Judaism is our heritage – Torah is our reservoir of wisdom. There are rewards inherent within, but only for those who seek them out.

As we embark on the New Year of 5769, I pray that we each look inwardly and declare along with the Psalmist, “Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is Your way with those who love your name.”

Kein Yehi Ratzon – May this be G-d’s will.

Amen.