Is God a Given?

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Rabbi Cardozo's analysis rings true: Most synagogues no longer serve as the hub or heartbeat of Jewish connectivity, especially for young Jews. Many people no longer feel God in the pews, nor do they feel the "big" questions are answered in synagogues. God has left the building.

But correct as Cardozo may be about widespread disenchantment, he makes one overriding assumption that's seems faulty: He speaks about God as if God is a given—as if every Jew accepts "His" existence. The average American Jew doesn't talk about God, lacks the vocabulary with which to articulate what or who God is or means, or doubts whether God exists at all. Most Jews I encounter don't know where God might be found, or even if God is missing.

It's not that science is the sole culprit, as Cardozo suggests, that we've been reasoned out of faith. It's simply that God is not a self-evident or felt presence in the lives of many Jews. If the concept of God is discussed, it is usually as the exemplar of a moral life, or alternatively, as the object of praise and appreciation on the siddur page. Few Jews in today's world describe themselves as having a deep relationship with God as counselor, confidante, or spiritual center of gravity.

When Cardozo critiques the "regular synagogue visitors" who "only speak to Him when they need Him," I would counter that most Jews I know aren't certain there is a "Him" at all, let alone someone they petition. Cardozo says we never "hear Him when He calls for help in pursuing the purpose of His creation," but I believe

that Cardozo's three assumptions are just that—assumptions that a) there is a God; b) God needs our help; and c) God calls out to us.

Ask the majority of American Jews if they're sure there is a God. Ask them if they believe God requires our participation. Ask if they've ever heard God or think they might.

Certainly there are Jews who believe in the notion that God, if not the sole author of creation, had a decisive hand in our miraculous universe, but those same Jews don't necessarily believe that God expects us to help complete (or improve) creation, or that God calls to us in a way that we're able to actually hear or heed.

So if there is a spiritual drought today, it may not just be the fault of institutional Judaism and lackluster shul life, but of Jews who have a basic resistance to God in the modern age.

Reading Cardozo's essay made me wish God were indeed part of our daily conversation. Wouldn't every uncertain Jew benefit from a direct, personal challenge: Why does God remain such a problematic idea? What are we looking for when we talk about "spirituality"? What role has God played, not just in our history, texts, and traditions, but in our most private moments?

How refreshing it would be if our institutional leaders—be they rabbis, cantors, or educators— would actually press us to ask the hardest questions of ourselves: Is it possible to be a Jew without God? Might you have already communed with God without even knowing it? Do you accept the role that God supposedly has played in our collective story? How do you conceptualize the God to whom you pray?

When Cardozo writes that "We have replaced God with prayers, no longer realizing to Whom we are praying," that's a blunt criticism, deserving of blunt debate: Is prayer a substitute for a more intimate, honest relationship with God? If Cardozo is correct that we don't realize to whom we are praying, how would we begin to correct that? Where would the realization ultimately come from?

What I observe in today's Jewish life is a bifurcation between those who, in essence, already have it, or "get it," and those who are flailing or have given up the search. There's a gulf between the self-appointed "insiders" who are wholly confident in their relationship with God, and those who, when it comes to belief or worship, are at sea, lack the comfort or fluency of faith, drop in and out of ritual. Cardozo's essay seems to be directed at those already in the inner circle. I wish he could also have addressed those Jews who don't yet have a direct line to the divine.

Certainly, there are new epicenters of engagement, be they as formal as independent minyanim, or as casual as coffee conversations. But what both the new guard and the old share is buy-in: unquestioned faith in a deity and a confident sense of spiritual access, neither of which can be assumed among the wider Jewish population. I'd wager that the largest swath of our community feels little or no meaningful connection to the God whose many names fill every blessing we say and every page of our prayer books.

I belong to a synagogue whose practices richly and consistently contradict Cardozo's characterization of shuls as "religiously sterile and spiritually empty." An historic landmark with more than 2,000 families, Central Synagogue, a Reform congregation in Manhattan, has managed to create the "excitement" he says is lacking. More to the point, I find God there in every way. It's difficult to explain why, without sounding lightweight, imprecise, even saccharine; but I'll do it anyway. To begin with, I feel God in the synagogue's physical space—the soaring ceilings, honeyed lighting, eternal flame, stenciled wall designs that artisans and congregants reproduced meticulously after a devastating fire. I feel God in the fact that on Friday nights, the full pews are populated by busy New Yorkers who could easily choose to go to the gym or the movies instead.

I feel God in the cantor's soulful voice and in the clarinet melodies that somehow conjure my old Yiddish-speaking immigrant aunts and uncles, the weeping and wanderings of past generations. I see God in the glowing Shabbat tapers lit on a small wooden table on the bimah. God is in the aisles during the Torah's procession and resonates in the rabbi's strong embrace, in each friend's "Shabbat Shalom," in the sight of children tearing off pieces of challah.

I have felt God in my private conversations with the clergy and in those decisive moments of struggle where the senior rabbi reached out to my family before we asked and before we knew realized how much we needed him.

I felt God on Mount Scopus overlooking Jerusalem and while chanting Shabbat blessings atop King David's tower, and while walking the beaches of Tel Aviv.

I felt God when the congregation mobilized instantly to clothe and feed victims of Hurricane Sandy—assembly lines of families filling boxes and garbage bags to cart out to Rockaway.

I feel God every Thursday at dawn when my daughter and I serve breakfast to 100 homeless men and women in the lobby of our religious school.

I feel God when I’m deconstructing a line of Torah with the monthly study group that meets in my living room, led by a teacher from Mechon Hadar. There are lessons that stretch my thinking about how to live a grateful, giving life, how to apply our ancient texts to daily decisions.

I often hear rabbis talk about finding God “in relationships,” and I know exactly what they mean: I’ve experienced friendships that feel as if God orchestrated them—to teach me something, ask more of me, make me feel alert, needed, beholden.

I absolutely feel God in my daughter and son’s faces and in my husband’s hands.

I believe that a Jew needn’t be strictly observant to feel God’s presence, but the message that comes through so often is that God only exists for the devout; you have to do more to even get close. Yet many of us have exactly the appetite that Cardozo describes—we “want to study God and understand why He created the world and what the meaning of life is all about. What is the human condition? What is a religious experience? How do we confront death?” What Cardozo seems to overlook is the fragility of faith; it isn’t—pun intended—God-given. He’s right to ask the question, “Who wants to live a life that passes by unnoticed?” But he’s wrong to assume that most modern Jews see God as the clear answer to living a noticed life.

I would love to meet God in that "mysterious stratosphere" in which fundamental questions linger unanswered. But before any of us wander there, let’s acknowledge that most Jews can’t “move to God’s new habitat” until they are sure God inhabits any place at all, or until they see that God has been beside them all along.