

“The Great Siri in the Sky”

Rabbi Alex Lazarus-Klein

A few weeks ago graphic artist Liana Finck from the Forward asked her friends and family what they thought God looked like when they were kids. Here is a sampling of the responses:

- the sun
- a giant white constellation in the sky
- a genie from Aladdin
- Santa Claus
- A large ram with big horns poised atop a cloud
- Zeus
- Peter Pan, the Disney Version
- The little Caesar’s logo
- Gregory Peck in To Kill a Mockingbird
- Abraham Lincoln
- The Statue of Liberty
- Our synagogue director
- Our synagogue rabbi
- Kenny Rogers
- And, then my favorite, someone who said “I was taught to pray to Adonai which I thought meant I don’t know.”

Here you have a window into our culture: a smattering of Greek mythology, TV commercials, famous Americans, Hollywood stars, country music singers, and, of course, Walt Disney movies.

What you do not have are the two standard theological images for High Holidays, summarized in two Hebrew words *Avinu Malchenu*, God Our Father, God Our King.

Thousands of years after the first machzor came neatly printed from heads of our ancient rabbis into the pages of our revered texts, our world has changed.

What we read, what we see, what we believe is different. And, that is okay. It's even Jewish.

To explain, let me tell you a story, a rabbinic story, also known as a *midrash*.

When Moses died and went up to God, he found God carefully carving the letters of the Torah. For Moses, it was like seeing himself on Mount Sinai working on the stone tablets.

But, something was different about the letters God was using. Some of the letters needed little marks above them, marks that were not actually part of the letters themselves. Letters like Beth, *Daleth*, *He*, *Kheth*, *Yud* and *Quf* had one line going up. Others like *Gimel*, *Zayin*, *Tet*, *Nun*, *Ayin*, *Tzadi* and *Shin* had 3 little squiggly lines.

Each of these artistic flourishes seemed unnecessary. What could they possibly add to the language of the commandments?

So, Moses asked God, "why?"

"Let me show you," God replied.

Suddenly, Moses turned around and was transported to a study house many years in the future. There students were gathered at the feet of an esteemed scholar. He had the text God had been working on, only now, instead of on a stone tablet, it was on a papyrus. And, the students were immersed in their study hanging on every word of their teacher.

"Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Akiva," one of them began, asking an elaborate question about the flourishes above the letters, flourishes he called crowns or *Ketarim*. To which the teacher responded with an eloquent answer that was far above Moses' head. He hung his head, upset that he could not understand.

But, then, a second student asked a question. And, this time, Rabbi Akiva referred back to Moses and Mount Sinai in his answer. Moses smiled, feeling a sigh of relief.

Instantly, Moses was back before God, who told him (and I paraphrase from the actual text), “You see those crowns on the letters I am writing. One day a great teacher named Rabbi Akiva will make a great meaning out of them and that is why they are important.”

The amazing thing in our very old tradition is that even the time of the rabbis (roughly two thousand years ago) was, still, another fifteen hundred or so years after the time of Moses.

The rabbis understood that between Moses and Rabbi Akiva much had changed about the world. Technology was different: parchment had replaced tablets; the Hebrew alphabet had been transformed from pictures to letters. Our cultural understanding had changed: the Assyrians had been replaced by the Babylonians, who had been replaced by the Persians, who had been replaced by the Greeks, who had been replaced by the Romans. Society had changed: we no longer lived in the wilderness, but in established cities. In order for Judaism to survive, it had to be robust enough to accommodate those changes.

What I love about the early rabbis – the *Rishonim*, as we say in Hebrew - is that they had the chutzpah to create a story where Moses, the greatest leader our people has ever seen, could feel lost and confused about a generation that preceded him. (And, of course, that they understood time travel.)

In another famous rabbinic anecdote, the rabbis are arguing over a point of law related to the kashering of an oven. Rabbi Eliezer just knows he is right and goes to great lengths to prove it, causing the walls of the study hall to shake, the water of a river to go backward, and even a heavenly voice to attest to his position. But, it is all in vain, as his colleagues remind him, “Lo B’Shamayim Hi,” “It is not in heaven.” Torah, and all that comes with it, is not in the hands of heaven, but in our own. And those hands change, from generation to generation, from time until eternity.

Tonight, I am going to attempt to reacquaint you with Elohim, Adonai, Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey, El-Shadai, or perhaps, just the great SIRI in the sky. (As an aside, my 4-

year-old son thinks you can ask anything from SIRI. He is still hoping to get the boomerang he asked for a few weeks ago.)

First, we'll start some ground rules. There are many religious institutions in America that use the big G-O-D (no dash necessary in the English) as a cudgel for belief. It is your ticket in or out of the sanctuary.

So, right from the beginning, I will tell you that Judaism does not do that. It is understood here that you can be:

- a monotheist (belief in one God),
- a pantheist (belief in God is equivalent to nature),
- a panentheist (belief that God is connected to the Universe),
- a transnaturalist (Mordecai Kaplan's view of God),
- a diest (belief that God can be good and evil),
- a henotheist (belief in one God, but acknowledging other Gods),
- a substance monotheist (belief that there are many forms of God),
- a humanist (belief in the goodness of humanity),
- and, even, and most certainly, an atheist (not believing in God at all).

The website *Jewish Values Online* recently posted a question from an atheist struggling whether to attend High Holiday services. On the site, there are answers from rabbis from different denominations. I like the Reform rabbi's (Brooks Susman from Congregation Kol Ami in New Jersey) response the best, "The Holy Day observances need not be either for or about God. Rather they are about each individual; a time to take an inventory of the past year, and to do so in the presence of a community."

Personally, in my young adulthood I went through many iterations of belief in God from Orthodox Judaism to Nihilism. And, while today I very much believe in a supreme presence that fills the universe, what and how that God takes shape and impacts my life continues to shift through the years.

Second, while the language of our prayers may feel fixed in the *machzor*, both the Gates of Repentance *and Kol Haneshamah* (little and big, dark red and light red)

allow room for new interpretations. If the image of God as father, king, Lord, etc. bothers you, remember it is just language. As rabbi, I give you permission to substitute your own language into the prayers. Those little squiggly lines on top of the letters were meant to be bridges and not gates, welcoming us in, and not locking us out.

Lastly, Judaism encourages a multiplicity of beliefs. Is the joke “two Jews, five opinions,” really such a bad thing?

There is a wonderful anecdote that Rabbi Les Bronstein recently offered about his teacher Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, one of the great Jewish spiritual leaders of our time.

Bronstein wrote about a time when Kushner “was a rabbinical student in New York, having come from a classical Reform background in Detroit and three years at the equally classical Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati. One afternoon – this was the mid-Sixties - he was sitting in a little hole-in-the-wall milchig restaurant in the Lower East Side, parked at one of those Formica tables of yore, enjoying a bowl of borscht and working his way through a big tome of Talmud, trying to negotiate his Gemara assignment.

An older man with a just-off-the-boat hat and garb – and accent - was sitting a few tables away. There was practically no one else in the place. ‘Nu, young man,’ said the onlooker, ‘I see you are a student.’

‘Yes,’ said my future teacher, startled by the interruption in his train of thought. ‘So,’ said the older man, ‘if you are a student, let’s have an argument.’ ‘But I believe in God,’ retorted the young Kushner, now thrown entirely off balance. ‘Okay,’ said the old Jew, ‘so I don’t.’”

We do not come here on Yom Kippur to agree with one another. As the members of our Saturday morning Torah study know all too well, our sacred texts are not about compliance, they are about engagement.

Thousands of years have passed since the days of Moses, since the days of Rabbi Akiva, and still we argue. We argue with one another, we argue with our tradition, we argue with and about God. Even on Yom Kippur.

Just look closely at the pages of your Machzor. There you will find ancient piyyutim, Biblical verses, and contemporary readings, all with slightly different understandings about God and about Judaism. However, every argument is made with love, L'Shem Shamayim, "in the name of heaven," as the rabbi's would say.

So, whether you picture God as a he or a she, or possibly as the Statue of Liberty or Kenny Rogers, or not at all, just join in on the conversation. In the end, that is what will keep Judaism going this year and the next, and God willing, and for many, many years to come.

A Tzam Kal, an easy and meaningful fast, and a G'mar Chatimah Tovah, May you be written and sealed in the book of life.