
LOOKING FOR GOD IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Rabbi Alan Lurie
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A man recently came into my office for a job interview. He appeared to be in his early fifties and had an impressive resume. As I explained my company's needs and he spoke about his experience and goals, I noticed that he was distracted by one of the framed items hanging near my desk, and so I turned to see what he was looking at.

"Is that a Rabbinic Certificate?" he asked. "Are you a Rabbi?"

"Yup, but only after hours," I answered.

He smiled politely, and said, "Can I ask you a question? I hope that you won't be offended, but...do you actually believe in God? I mean really believe?"

Now, that's quite a change of topics, I thought.

"Actually, yes, I do," I answered.

He looked surprised and, it seemed, relieved.

"Really?" he replied. "Well, I suppose, as a Rabbi, you have to. But frankly, I don't. I can't...believe in God, that is. For me, belief in God seems irrational. I can't believe that there is some kind of being that watches us and cares about us. It doesn't make sense. Not in this world, the way it is, with the things that happen—that have already happened. Besides, science has proven that most of the stories in the Bible are myths. Faith and reason are opposites, and I am not about to abandon my reason."

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In spite of my usual habit of wanting to rush in with a theological response to address this sentiment—which I had heard many times in the past—I simply nodded and suggested that this would be a good conversation to continue later, perhaps over coffee. This man was looking for a job, after all, not a theology lesson. And I’ve come to learn that most people who voice such challenging opinions about God and religion are not looking for counter arguments but simply want to air understandable grievances, which often stem from negative personal experiences or lack of exposure to resonant viewpoints. Such negative experiences then create impediments to understanding and encountering God in a way that is consistent with the realities of their lives, the workings of their minds, and the revelations of science. Most of us, I believe, have wrestled with such impediments, which can seem to be insurmountable walls, separating those who “believe” from those who question, with no apparent reconciliation possible.

Surprisingly, the Bible presents impediments to understanding God and also responds with answers that the man who came in to my office would probably find unexpected. I could have directed him to four short sentences near the beginning of the Book of Exodus, which occur during the famous story of Moses’ first encounter with God at the burning bush. This story is well known—even to those who

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have never read the Bible—through the movie visions of Cecil B. DeMille and Stephen Spielberg, but a quick overview of the story can set the context: Born a Hebrew slave in Egypt and condemned by the Pharaoh to be killed along with all newborn Hebrew males, the baby Moses is placed by his mother in a basket and sent adrift on the Nile in a desperate attempt to save his life. The basket is soon discovered by the Pharaoh's daughter, who raises Moses as her son; as a Prince of Egypt. One day, the young Prince sees an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Hebrew slave. Enraged by this injustice, Moses kills the taskmaster and flees into the desert, eventually settling in the land of Midian, where he becomes a shepherd. Many years later, while tending his flock, Moses wanders onto the "Mountain of God," where his life suddenly changes. The text tells us the following:

An angel of God appeared to him [Moses] in a blaze of fire from amid the bush. He saw, and behold, the bush was burning in the fire but the bush was not consumed. Moses thought "I will turn now and look at this great sight—why will the bush not be burned?" God saw that he turned aside to see, and called out to him from amid the bush and said "Moses, Moses," and he replied, "Here I am."

Embedded in these four sentences, which describe Moses' epiphany—his awakening to God's

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presence—are several typical impediments to experiencing God, along with associated avenues for resolutions. Below, I present these impediments as first-person statements, similar to those voiced by the man who came in to my office:

Impediment 1: I see no obvious proof of God's existence. I'll believe when I see a miracle.

The Bible is filled with spectacular miracles, which might lead us to look for God in such spectacles (splitting the Hudson might be a good start). The revelation to Moses, though, comes not through splitting the sea or raising the dead, but through a little unassuming bush that has caught fire. In a hot, dry climate, it would not be unusual to see such a burning bush, and so the miracle—that the bush was not consumed—was quite ordinary and very subtle. Moses would have needed to look carefully at the bush for some time before noticing that it was not reduced by the flames. In that moment of attention to an everyday event, Moses saw the Divine presence burning in the bush. Perhaps it appeared to Moses that the bush was not consumed because he was so completely attentive that he experienced a timeless moment, when a deeper level of reality can be clearly seen. The little bush teaches us that God can be found when we pay attention to the everyday miracle that surround us—the things we all too routinely take for granted:

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a beautiful tree, the workings of our bodies, the wonder of our minds, and the gift of our children, friends, and jobs. When we consciously place our awareness on these everyday miracles, God's presence is revealed. Great spectacles might make for exciting movies but are the wrong place to look for God, based on misunderstanding the nature of, and our relationship to, the Divine.

Impediment 2: I've been waiting to hear from God—to be called... but nothing has happened.

Some people wait to be given a clear sign, to hear a voice, or to feel certain, before deciding to even consider the notion of God. The story of Moses teaches us the opposite. Divine revelation happened only after Moses noticed the burning bush and turned his attention on it. In the story God "sees" that Moses turns to look at the "great sight" and then calls to him. In other words, Moses acts first, and then God responds. Moses decides to take the first step toward God by turning toward life in an attitude of amazement. Then the Divine reveals itself. We have been given the great gift of consciousness and the free will to choose a personal direction—toward growth and connectedness, stagnation, or decline and isolation. Our decision determines how, and whether, we experience God. Turning toward the Divine, though, can be difficult

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because the pressures and distractions of our lives can blind us to the miracles that surround us, leaving us numb, cynical, or desperate for escape. Like most of us, I struggle with this daily. At those times I often think of the story of the Lost Prince. In this story, humanity is the Prince, and God is the King:

Once there was a King and a Prince who lived happily together in a castle. One day, when the Prince was old enough, he decided to leave the castle to explore the world. In his explorations the Prince soon became lost, and even forgot about the King and the castle. The worried King sent a messenger to his beloved son, with a note; "Please return to me." The Prince read the note, but told the messenger, "I can not return. I don't know the way." The messenger relayed the Prince's answer to the King. "Tell him to take just one step in my direction," the King replied "and I will come the rest of the way."

Of course grace—God's unsought self-revelation—happens, but as this story tells us, return and reconnection are always available, just waiting for us to listen and to act; to consciously take the first step.

Impediment 3: I can't prove God's existence rationally, which is the only way to knowledge.

This is a major impediment for many. If we cannot logically prove God's existence, isn't God just a

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wishful delusion, a manipulative construct of control-based religion, or a prerational fantasy? Some philosophers have tried to create rational arguments for God's existence, but I doubt that anyone has ever truly found a satisfying understanding of, and relationship with, God through logic. Moses' encounter with God presents a different approach. The text tells us that an angel of God appeared to Moses in the fire. Why an angel, and why fire? Angels, of course, are not physical beings—not beautiful winged creatures—but are, in Jewish mystical tradition (which first presented the idea of angels), carriers of the Divine Will; a bridge from the timeless, formless, incomprehensible reality of God into the limited realm of physicality. The Talmud says that above every blade of grass floats an angel whispering “grow...grow.” The angel in the fire in the bush, then, is this Divine energy that animates all matter, which is visible to one who looks and sees. This is the fire that burns but does not consume. Moses had a direct experience of God's presence coursing through the veins of this little bush, and then he could hear the Divine “voice” calling him to his life's purpose. Intellect can provide a valuable categorical framework, but, as Moses learned, God's presence is experienced and felt, not conceptualized.

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Impediment 4: A relationship with God will make me arrogant and/or sheepish.

To some, it might seem that those who believe in God are giving up their individuality and intellect by buying into a packaged, unquestionable, unprovable doctrine that teaches that those who disagree are lost, misguided, or downright evil, leading to the paradoxical combination of arrogant certainty that one has ownership of Truth, along with the abdication of personal questioning. Not an appealing picture. Again, the story of Moses at the burning bush presents a different image. Moses responds to God's call by saying "*hineini*," "I am here." This is not a surrender of individuality, nor acceptance of a religious creed, but is a declaration of full readiness to listen, a commitment to serve, and a desire to receive guidance and wisdom. Moses does not answer in arrogance. He does not think, "Wow, I must be special to have received this personal call from Heaven." Instead, he asks, "Why me? I am not capable to take on the huge task at hand." This is not false humility, or covering in shame, but is an honest recognition of his limitations from an awareness that he exists in a two-way relationship to his Creator, with the right to challenge and question. Moses both submits to and argues with God, and over the next 40 years of his life, this dynamic relationship makes Moses more individual, more purposeful, effective, and profoundly humble.

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Impediment 5: “Spiritual experiences” are just feel-good self-indulgence.

One of the unfortunate aspects of much modern spirituality is that it can often turn toward self-involvement, based on the belief that the *primary* goal of such spiritual practices, such as meditation, yoga, and prayer, is to receive Divine personal reward; to be given special “powers” (clairvoyance, ability to read energies, or to heal themselves), to be protected by life’s suffering, and to have a level of clarity that raises one above others. Although these practices might, and ought to, make us feel better about ourselves, and can lead to heightened abilities, this is not the goal or aim of spirituality and religion. Moses’ encounter with God teaches us that a true spiritual path and relationship with God makes us more sensitive to the needs and feelings of others, less enthralled by the tug of our egos, and propels us to socially beneficial action. Moses is called because he needs to perform a task that will eventually lead to the transformation of the world, and he devotes the rest of his life to answering this call. Human beings are given legs, hands, and minds so that we can act. To retreat *only* in to self-care is an abdication of this responsibility and is a distortion of a true spiritual path.

I told the man who came into my office that, unfortunately, we were not looking for someone

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with his skill sets and experience at that time. I recommended some other firms that he might call and encouraged him to stay in touch. I haven't heard back from him, though, and don't know if he found a job. I wonder if these explanations of Moses' encounter at the burning bush would have made any impact on him. Maybe not. God is not found in explanations. Maybe, though, these points would have given some direction to his search, or at least have helped him to see that the "battle" between faith and reason is built on insubstantial foundations, and that there are ways of understanding God and religion that can dissolve his impediments, open him to new possibilities, enrich his life, and help him to find some comfort as he searches for work in these difficult times.

Wishing you well,
Alan