

On God

March 30, 2005 CCAR Convention, Rabbi Steve Cohen

Panel on Pittsburgh Principles and the Direction of Reform Judaism

Richard, I would like to make an observation about your talk today and its relationship to the Pittsburgh Principles of 1999. In the Principles you gave us the voice from Sinai, calling us to the fundamentals of Judaism: text, mitzvot, people and God. In your talk today you have given us the haftarah, the voice of Isaiah and Jeremiah, rebuking, goading and demanding that we not allow our fulfillment of the Torah to become mindless, complacent, and ethically lazy. We know that we need both Torah and haftarah, and I believe I speak for all of us Richard in thanking God for you, the rare teacher who gives us both.

I have been asked to comment upon the first of the three sections of the Principles, to speak about God in Reform Judaism today. Richard has said that “what we affirmed in 1999 must challenge us in 2005. **In the realm of God, we affirmed that we want to acknowledge more fully the role the Eternal plays in our life.**”

This is the point upon which I would like to focus my remarks. **We rabbis, and our congregants, would like to set God at the center of our lives.** We understand from all of our sources that for a Jew, God is fundamental, central and unavoidable. **And yet,** and this is the crux of the challenge: **the ultimate reality of God is utterly impenetrable and mysterious.** Set God aside for a moment. How many of us can make heads or tails out of modern physics? Most of us cannot begin to comprehend the physical structures of our universe; how can we hope to say anything meaningful about the creative source which brought that universe into being?

This dilemma is the challenge which we face daily in prayer, and in teaching and living our Jewish faith. **How do we set God at the center of our lives when we do not have the faintest idea who or what God is?** This is not a new problem, of course. Moses in the cleft of the rock, seeks and is denied a vision of God’s glory; an emptiness fills the space between the keruvim at the heart of the mishkan; one thinks of Maimonides’ negative theology; the Kabbalists’ use of *AYIN* as a Divine epithet; our Reform Founders in 1889 referring not to “God” but to the “God-idea”; and Larry Hoffman’s anguished personal testimony on Monday of this conference. We return again and again to the problem of how to organize our human lives around an unknowable God. As we gather here at the start of the 21st century, it remains unclear to me what will be our answer to this age-old Jewish dilemma.

Six years ago, Richard, I remember a discussion in which we mused that perhaps what we needed were not a set of Reform Principles but a set of Reform Poems. I still believe that if we would teach about the unknowable God, and God’s place in our own lives, we need to help our congregants to think both poetically, and paradoxically. Neither of these will be easy.

About fifteen years ago, a group of Tibetan Buddhist monks came to Santa Barbara and created a sand mandala at the University Art Museum. It took them several weeks of painstaking work, in which three or four monks spent many hours each day tapping out tiny quantities of different colored sand in amazingly intricate designs, until by the end of their stay they had produced a work of dazzling design and color, mapping out their religion's depiction of the chambers of the palace of heaven. And when they finished, the monks lifted up the large board on which they had created the sand mandala and poured it all into the ocean.

I have neither the artistic ability nor the patience of those monks, but I will never forget their ability to approach a sacred task with utter reverence, and then to destroy the product of their work. This is the way I think we need to be with our God language. We use our imagination to create metaphors for God, and we pour our hearts and our souls into those metaphors. Our prayers are all metaphor; they are all projections by our human mind, painting pictures of God with the language and imagery of our own life experience. The very words "Baruch Atah," in which we say "You" to the creator of all time and space is the wildest metaphor of all, and we throw ourselves into it, heart and soul...if we are to live as Jews, we have no choice. And the prayer, the metaphor, if we allow it, nourishes us with comfort and courage and hope and strength. But then, like the monks at the shore of the ocean, a time comes when we have to rise up against the work of our own imaginations, like Abraham, and smash our own metaphors to pieces. Or like Moses, who after forty days and nights on the mountaintop, smashed the tablets of the covenant. And according to the midrash, God said to him: "*yashar koach sheh shibarta otam*. Well done for smashing them."

This, I think, is one aspect of a paradoxical approach by which our generation may begin to organize our lives around our unknown God. We have been wandering for so long in the secular desert; many of us are dying of thirst for holiness, for reverence, for God. And with care and imagination, we can do much to restore reverence to our world. But we know and we would do well to remind ourselves often, that every word, every gesture, every element of our religious life is the product of our own hands and minds. And that sooner or later they will tend to become objects of idolatry. When that happens, or even before it happens, we must be ready to smash our own metaphors. Let us be reverent but let us also be iconoclasts.

A second aspect of a paradoxical Judaism for our generation is taught by Adin Steinsaltz who speaks of two modes of being in Judaism. The first mode, he says, is study, in which we bring to bear all the power and resources of our rational, analytical mind. In the mode of study, says Steinsaltz, all questions are permitted. In Talmud Torah, we ask and ask and ask. Nothing is off-limits, and the harder the question the better. But the second mode of being in Judaism, says Steinsaltz, is prayer, in which we let go of our questions, relax the critical muscle in our minds, and pour out our hearts to God in simplicity.

Neither mode is right or wrong. Both are necessary for a complete Jewish life, and we must oscillate back and forth between the two modes of study and of prayer, just as we must oscillate between waking and sleeping, or between work and rest.

Steinsaltz's prescription, I believe, can help those of us who seek to organize our lives around the unknown God. Because in our mode of critical thinking, we will be reminded of, and we will insist upon, the utter unknowability of God. We will see clearly the social and psychological constructions of our religion, throwing open the doors and windows of our minds and letting the bright sunshine of reason flood the darkest corners of our lives. But then we will also make time to step out of the sunlight, into the night-time of prayer, of sleep, of dreams. When Yaakov arrived at *hamakom*, says the midrash, God extinguished the sun, like a king who commands his household saying "put out the lanterns, for I desire to speak with my friend in intimacy."

Our role as rabbi, in all of this, as Larry Hoffman has put it so nicely, is not so much to "explain" as to "show." Our congregants will see us and hear us oscillating back and forth between one mode and the other...sometimes asking what they thought was a forbidden question, or laughing at a sacred cow, and then at other times sharing the most intimate secrets of our soul. If our congregants see us moving comfortably and gracefully between the modes of study and prayer, and standing before them as a whole person, then we will have given them our most important teaching about God.

Before concluding, I would like to address myself directly to Richard's plea that we reclaim the long-silenced voice of the prophets, who believed that God demanded that justice roll down like water...the prophetic vision that has, as Richard says, been for so long been our hallmark.

Here the stakes are very high. Much of what we love best in the world is threatened by forces who do not acknowledge God's unknowability. Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalists have taken hold of the sacred name of God and are wielding it like a sword against their enemies...that would be us. And so our lives depend on our answering correctly the question: is a Judaism of poetry and paradox sufficiently muscular; is it potent enough to protect our world and our lives in this contest?

I say yes. Here, where the stakes are highest, is where a paradoxical Judaism becomes most difficult but also most powerful. Because to speak of God's unknowability is in no way to deny God's reality. On the contrary, by insisting upon God's unknowability, we open up a sacred empty space, a holy of holies, inside ourselves within which God can dwell and from which the voice of God can issue like fire.

I am speaking about the divine fire of metaphor. The prophets did not speak in prose, nor did they employ political slogans. Their most memorable words, their most motivating words, were all metaphor: swords morphing into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, justice rolling down like water; the fast of sharing bread with the hungry; the sacrificial offering of a broken heart.

These words changed the world because the men who spoke them made space within themselves for the unknowable God. They knew that they did not know. Moses was the greatest of all our prophets, because he was *anav mikol adam*...the humblest of all men.

We do not repair the world by shouting loudly that God is on our side. The other side can shout just as loudly, or louder. And the shouting match will leave all thoughtful people disgusted with both sides, each arrogantly claiming the right to speak for the creator of the universe.

The prophetic voice is humble. It knows that it does not know.

The prophetic voice is fire, issuing from our lips like from the volcano Sinai. The prophetic voice is utterly human, but all who hear it know at once that it is the word of the living God.