

AN ADAPTIVE GOD

M A

Merely weeks before this paper was due, I was ready to abandon writing it entirely. For the two whole years before then, I was filled with nothing but excitement about my Jewish ideas and finally getting them down on paper. In the many years before that, I was ready to reject Judaism entirely. In the span of a week, a month -- even a day, one's outlook on life with regard to Judaism has the ability to dramatically shift; this shift can be as great as a total belief to a total rejection, or as minor as a small difference in interpretation of various rules or laws.

Earlier this year, these shifts led me to a crisis. Having held a firm belief in God for the past two years -- specifically in a Jewish God that was able to have a strong noticeable difference on people's lives, I was shocked after an intense period of self-reflection and re-evaluation that this belief no longer held true for me. I no longer believed in God in that way, or any God at all per se. This also came at a time when I am preparing to leave home, but not just home, also all of the traditions and practices there regarding how we participate in the Jewish religion. This crisis directly impacted this very paper here: how can I set my Jewish identity in a work that is as much of a milestone as this one, at a time when that whole concept is in a constant state of dramatic fluctuations?

After a talk with our very own Rabbi, I began journeying through every belief I have held about Judaism in my life, including those I held when I was as young as seven-years-old. I went through every major phase of belief -- from the belief that religion is simply a waste, to the belief that God is always there listening to what each and every one of us personally needs. In the process, I realized one common factor: whatever was happening in my life at the time, my sense of belief in Judaism helped me to understand what was going on, and to provide a constant sense of optimism about the future. This essay explores how Judaism is an adaptive religion that serves the purpose of providing support and an explanation of the world to those who choose to follow it.

Many of my earliest memories are actually here at Beth El. Up until approximately the age of 12, I was spending every Saturday morning here for Shabbat services. The constant reading of these texts starting from such a young age led to a very traditional sense of God, and a traditional sense of Judaism. As a child, like most other children, what I wanted at any given time was tangible. Partnered with the traditional sense of God I had from reading the Sabbath prayers every week, I essentially believed that God was a figure who listened to every follower and was ready to grant their individual desires. This led to a deep engagement in any and all prayer in Judaism. I would always recite the *Shema* when appropriate, say the appropriate blessings before each and every meal, as well as *Shehecheyanu* before doing anything for the first time. Every Friday night on Shabbat, I would say all the blessings in Hebrew, and would do so the next day at temple on Saturday. During other times, I would tell God under my breath what it is I desired in the world. As a young child, this belief set was simple. Based on a juvenile interpretation of the Jewish prayers, the belief was that if I showed a stronger dedication to God and the practices of Judaism, God would show a stronger dedication to me.

Looking back at this now, it can be very hard to imagine in what way Judaism benefitted me during this period of my life. While this behavior can be interpreted as an excessive amount of time spent wasted on making empty wishes to nobody, the whole principle of it was not only shaping who I was but who I would become. The active participation in the rituals was establishing a rhythm to my life, something that could stay consistent despite any potential future changes in my life.

To this day, I still find it difficult to imagine a Friday night without candles; I can't picture not saying *Hamotzi* before breaking a challah before starting the meal. This rhythm, established at a young age, has been a driving force in my Judaism throughout my entire life. As well as the dedication to ritual, this straightforward interpretation of God benefits me to this day. While I believe wishing to God is essentially a useless task, doing so instilled a constant sense of optimism. During these years I had a constant hope, a constant belief that God was truly listening to what I was saying and was going to actively make my life better. While my belief that God really has this power has clearly faded, my optimism has not. God has been replaced by the goodness of people, the constant drive to make things right in the world. God has been replaced

by my belief that with hard work and activism a change for the better truly can be made in our current social and political climate. This constant sense of optimism that the world will get better, despite how impossible change may seem, is rooted in this constant belief from my early life that God will make my life better. One of the strongest and most helpful beliefs in my work to create a change in the world comes from Judaism and my early beliefs in God.

This isn't to say that my beliefs stayed this way throughout all of my childhood. Starting at around age ten, my belief in God evaporated entirely. This came from my discovery of problems that exist in the world and problems that exist in the Jewish religion as well as my own previous interpretations of it. This began with the realization that my ritual of praying to God for any change I wanted in my life was doing nothing, and, in fact, the changes I had seen came as a result of me hinting to various people in my life, such as my parents, as to what I wanted to see happen. This also came with the realization that the Torah and other texts were not history books.

At every Jewish holiday and celebration, I found myself questioning whether or not there was any real purpose to this religion. A significant moment occurred around the time of Chanukah, when I was in a heated debate with my mother about whether the story about the candle burning for eight days on an unreasonably low amount of oil invalidated the entire story. While I now have been taught the true reasoning behind the story, as well as different ways to interpret these texts, as a ten-year-old I felt as if, in this case, the book of Maccabees was lying and therefore nothing it could say, and nothing the religion could show, could have any value at all.

At this period in my life the most exciting thing about Jewish rituals and customs was the act of actively not engaging in them at all. It was during this time when I found all the holidays I once found incredibly fun, many of which I still do, an absolute bore. It is rather strange to think about this now. Specifically, in the past two years, I have loved attending Hebrew School and have found a general fascination with the studies of modern Jewish thought and learning. This being said, the place where I currently find myself, both with my Judaism and my life, would be absolutely impossible had I not gone through this stage of belief. Until this point, the root of my belief in God, and in the Jewish religion, essentially came from my parents. I had incorporated these beliefs because my parents had taken me to temple and had celebrated Jewish holidays and

traditions in our household. My rejection of Judaism and my Jewish identity was, for the first time, my choosing my own path when it came to religion. By making this choice about my religion, I set a precedent for myself to believe in whatever made the most sense to me, and to choose my religious beliefs and values based on that, not based on my parents.

Similarly, this stage paved the path to learning to re-interpret the words of the Torah to find a deeper, truer, meaning. When asked to write my D'Var Torah on a passage which describes the physical characteristics of God, I was rather horrified. Having spent the past few years rejecting the notion of God entirely, this task seemed impossible. However, having reached the age of thirteen, I found myself ready to consider that the Torah may be saying far more than is simply written in the text. In my D'Var, I discussed how the physical characteristics of God could be a metaphor, and how the Torah was not at all contradictory in its statements about whether God even had a physical body. For the first time, I considered the Torah as a text for analysis and learning, which would have been impossible had I not approached this task with the background belief that both God and Judaism were false.

Starting in the early spring of my sophomore year in high school, I had a series of experiences which seemed absolutely inexplicable by any standard understanding of the world. At age fifteen, I had begun to reach out to far more people, and had gotten to know many of them in a different way than I had known anyone before. Soon, with a select few of these people, I began to experience a strange phenomenon: I could be anywhere in the world, and be having absolutely no contact with a person-- no texting, no SnapChatting--absolutely nothing, and I would suddenly be able to feel what they were feeling. Instantly, even from my own house, I could tell if someone I knew well was feeling a certain way, and, if so, who it was and how they were feeling. I found myself instinctively knowing when people were going through a hard time, but also when something exciting was happening to them as well as any other emotion imaginable. This gift proved to be very useful at times, as well as drew me even closer to these people.

About a year later, Jay and I were having a discussion with our very own Scott, and I brought up this experience. Scott instantly recognized it as a theory of God he was familiar with, and with just a few tweaks, at age sixteen, I found myself firmly believing in God. This God worked in a

relatively simple way. Essentially, each and every person, regardless of personal or religious belief, had a connection to God. This connection, however, was meaningless unless two people grew close enough for God to connect them to one another. When two people made this connection, God became an expansion of one's empathy; these two people gained empathic abilities far beyond what is widely considered to be possible -- they became able to sense each other's emotions without any sort of contact. This was extremely beneficial to my life at the time, helping me survive some of the most difficult and stressful parts of my high school career.

While this experience with God was impactful on my personal life at the time, its effect on my Jewish life was far less noticeable. Despite beginning to engage more in Jewish celebrations and rituals, I was still avoiding many religious observances and choosing not to pray. This stemmed from the fact that the notion of a Jewish God in no way lined up with the God described in any of the prayers. It felt fundamentally wrong to me to be celebrating a God which I did not believe in. All things considered, it is undoubtable that this belief in God has had a lasting and positive impact on me. A few weeks ago, I had a sudden realization that these experiences of connection were no longer happening to me, and that during the time they occurred I was in a series of coincidences which happened to line up with someone else's view of God. However, it has certainly advanced my understanding as to what God is to me and what Judaism is to me.

Writing this paper has been an incredible opportunity to reflect on everything I have experienced in relation to God in my life so far, as well as to establish yet another view of God that I feel will carry me through many years to come. In exploring all these views I have had about God over time, only one thing stays consistent: the fact that my notion of God has always helped me understand the world and further myself not only as a Jew, but as a person. From instilling in myself a constant sense of optimism that the world will improve, to allowing myself to begin thinking about religion independently and critically, to finally helping me, as well as others in my life, get through a highly stressful time, and also reigniting my belief that God exists at all, every belief in God I have held for a long period of time has benefited me in ways nearly unimaginable. At least for now, I believe that God is simply a concept which adapts to whatever people need the most. This adaptive God helps people understand the world during whatever phase of life they may be going through, as well as provides them with inspiration for the future.

As for the impact on my Jewish life, in many ways I feel as if that hasn't changed at all. I will still celebrate Shabbat every Friday night and participate in every major Jewish holiday during the year. While I am not quite ready to begin picking up many of the rituals again, for the first time in a while I am ready to try. I am ready to try reading the prayers during services or drinking from the Kiddush cup. I may not know what my future holds, or what the impact of God will be on it, but I know for sure that this sense of God has given me an optimistic feeling about whatever is coming.