

## DISCOVERING MY BELIEF IN GOD

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The towel draped over the lower half of my body unraveled, falling onto the floor. Thinking of the countless bare feet that had walked upon that same stone floor, I reached down and hung the beige towel over a hook connected to the door. The small room carried a scent similar to that of a swimming pool, but I had already have been in plenty of swimming pools—this was something new—this was my first experience in a mikvah.

As I carefully walked down the stone steps, ripples spread and disrupted the water that had appeared as glass until then. A feeling of ease spread throughout my entire body, even as only half of me was submerged. This sensation brought feelings of warmth, intimacy and coziness. As I dunked my head in the pool, a flash of additional feelings stirred once again. This time, the sensations were more unexplainable, divine-like. Is this God? I thought to myself. This was the first time in my life that I seriously asked myself that question.

The ritual of immersion in a mikvah is to bathe in “living water.” In that holy pool, surrounded by that crystal clear water, I felt exactly that. Life. Life, not how I had normally experienced it, but an enhanced impression. Something unexplainable.

Three years later, I found myself coming into contact with that same feeling once again, this time over 5,000 miles away from home. I was traveling to Israel with a group of seventeen other Americans, and one of our last stops was the Western Wall. My experience at the Kotel seemed to propel me even further into a state of wonderment, this time leaving me even more confused on which words to describe my feelings.

The pale limestone filled my view as I found myself gazing up and down the ancient structure I had only seen in pictures up until this point. The ambient sounds of the city silenced as I walked even closer to the wall. I noticed the crumpled up pieces of paper that were wedged in between the massive bricks of stone; they were filled with prayers, wishes, and statements. All of a sudden, I found myself with my eyes gently closed, palms open, touching the smoothed-over stone itself. As my vision became black (as vision tends to be when one closes their eyes), beautiful arrays of hexagonal patterns emerged in my field of view—twirling, changing colors, much like a kaleidoscope. I began to rejoice in my life up until that very point in time, giving thanks for every privilege granted to me, every opportunity, everything in the world I loved.

While I attempt to summarize these events in clear words or phrases, no statements will rightfully describe my feelings. This very idea of uncertainty made me uncomfortable at the time, not being able to decipher my own feelings? However, as these unsettling thoughts eased into my conscience a few weeks after I had returned from Israel, other things started popping into my head. I began to start looking at everything very differently. The sky looked bluer

and more vibrant, the tuneful chirps of birds perched up on tree limbs seemed to hit my eardrum in the perfect way. My perception of the world shifted for the better, unleashing a storm of

inquisitive thoughts, seeking out the beauty of things I wouldn't have batted an eye at before. I savored looking at life through this lens, appreciating my surroundings in the world we live in.

The cause of this change was unknown to me until I sat down and thought about it myself. After the two separate experiences, one in the mikvah, one at the Kotel, I concluded that there were definitely some supernatural elements at play. It was no coincidence that these feelings of pure amazement took place at two holy Jewish sites. This world, I thought to myself, is too perfect in its own right to not have God. That's when it happened. That's when I realized my belief in God.

To me, God is not a massive white-bearded man up in the sky; to me God does not embody a person. To me, God is not a tangible being, because to me, God is absolutely everything. The thoughts we have, the people we are, the people we meet, a beautiful sunset in the Netherlands, a sandstorm in Baghdad, a double rainbow in Jamaica, a newborn baby, you, you, and you.

The famous Albert Einstein once said: "God' is a mystery. But a comprehensible mystery." God isn't supposed to be fully understood by anyone and everyone. The idea of God is so vast, so beyond us as a species, for us to fully perceive. However, despite all of the unanswered questions regarding God and the truth behind it, that doesn't mean we can't try to have a relationship with God. This is why you and I are Jewish. This is why our world has religion.

Growing up in a Reform Jewish household in Metro West Boston has had plenty of rewards. One of them, being, other Jews. Being lucky enough to live in the same community with people of my own faith brings about a sense of welcomeness and solidarity in my life. It also shows us Jews, that this concept of togetherness stretches much further than sheer numbers. While we only account for about 0.2% of the world, the Jewish community spans from Los Angeles to New York, from Boston to Haifa, and from Chicago to Paris. I'm also so lucky to be apart of one of the best Jewish communities in the area. Congregation Beth El of Sudbury River Valley has educated me twelve years, led me on trips to New York City and Israel. I even remember the field trip we took in seventh grade to a mikvah in the Newton. Before this trip, I had no clue what a mikvah was. Beth El has given me the opportunity to listen to Laurel's amazing voice time and time again, meet people my own age who I consider good friends, and be taught by two incredibly different yet amazing rabbis. Congregation Beth El has not only helped me develop as a Jew, but as an individual as well.

Twelve years of religious schooling allowed my classmates and I to be educated in Jewish studies, partake in absorbing conversation about life, and to learn to apply Jewish texts, stories, and traditions to present-day life. Specifically, class conversations regarding current

events or politics would elicit very insightful responses and opinions. I feel so lucky to have had the classmates I've had, intellectuals to say the least. Everyone had something to say, and no one was afraid to display their opinions and insights. An outsider may think that these long, drawn out conversations were far into the realm of being off-topic, however, we'd always have a way to relate Judaism to the topics brought up. I believe these discussions played a vital role in my maturity as a person, allowing me to practice expressing my own opinions, but also familiarizing me with the skill of listening to others. The ability to listen is an essential attribute that gives one the skills to educate themselves, but is also far-reaching in terms of proper socialization. Listening and being able to attentively hear others was something I always viewed as a challenge for myself before religious school became more conversation-based. Nonetheless, my proficiency in listening and trusting myself still comes up short.

I'm what you'd call an "overthinker." My mind is never blank, and more than half the time it can be likened to a powerful whirlwind, blowing and blowing, but never slowing down. One of my goals in life is to block off that whirlwind, calm myself down, and finally take a deep breath. I hope this can be achieved through proper mindfulness, and through the thought of Adonai, our one and only God. As I had said before, my belief concerning God comes down to something very simple at its core: God is everything and anything. With everything that is yet to come in my life, I want my loved ones, my passions, my morals, and my belief in God to remain with me throughout the entire way. As long as this can happen, my soul will be pleased indefinitely. However, for at least right now, the overthinking is here to stay awhile.

From the time I am writing this sentence, I have less than two months before it's my turn to graduate from high school. This marks a very significant transition in life for me, but also my family. Being the youngest of two in my family, and having a brother who is going into his senior year of college this August, my parents' job of raising children in their own home is complete. Gone are the morning routines, the three-person dinners, and telling Dad what I want at the grocery store. They start their new life as soon as I start mine—when they hug me goodbye in the doorway of my freshman dorm. This won't be easy for them, or for me. Change is never easy, and especially one of this importance and inevitability.

Despite all of the challenges of leaving Natick, Massachusetts, I do have a desire before moving day. That desire is to go to Mayyim Hayyim in Newton, the same mikvah I had gone to before I became a Bar Mitzvah. I want that feeling of perplexity again. Maybe it will help me along the way, and maybe I can finally gather some words to describe how it feels.