

The One Who Should Be Named:

God is not Lord Voldemort

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by David Reinhart

Shana Tova everyone. I'm now in my fifth year at HUC, and I must tell you, Rabbinical School is a weird place. From stupid jokes about the Rabbis of the Talmud, to ridiculously complicated and ongoing arguments about "what constitutes a sandwich", we students really have some strange conversations. (And, for the record, an open-faced sandwich is no-longer a sandwich.) Sometimes these discussions are just ridiculous and, honestly, idiotic, but, on occasion, they actually contain some real incite to our world.

I was a part of one of these discussions not too long ago. I was sitting in the library at school with a classmate and we were discussing God, as we're wont to do at HUC. Joseph had suggested that we need a new pronoun for God. Instead of the pronouns "he" or "she", whose gendered language don't make sense for God who has no gender, what should we call God. One thought, a serious suggestion, is the pronoun "they", which has come to be used as a common gender-neutral pronoun, even in the singular. Yet, using the typically plural "they" feels odd and inappropriate for a staunchly monotheistic God.

From there, without a good alternative, this conversation devolved into, let's call it, an opportunity for goofing off. As an alternative to "he" or "she", I was quick to suggest the pronoun "dude" as a way of solving the issues of gender. You know, "Hear O Israel Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. Blessed is Dude's glorious name now and forever." As great as this suggestion was, there was another that I liked even better.

One of the other students offered, instead of “he”, or “she”, or “they”, we could refer to God as “the one who must not be named.” So, yes, God is now Lord Voldemort. Not only do I love Harry Potter but I also appreciate a little irreverence, so I loved this comment. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how accurate that phrase and comparison as a name for God could be.

“The one who must not be named.” First, just in terms of basic description, this phrase is completely accurate. We are not allowed to pronounce the name of God. Any time we read the four-letter name of God – Yud Hey Vav Hey, the tetragrammaton – we instead say “Adonai”, meaning Lord or master. Which is actually similar to the Death Eaters, Lord Voldemort’s supporters, calling him the Dark Lord.

Either way, this leads us to a second and more troubling comparison. As Albus Dumbledore explains, “fear of a name only increases fear of the thing itself.” The act of avoiding saying the name of Lord Voldemort – this type of distance, disconnect, and unhealthy elevation of anyone or anything – leads to a strained relationship, even fear and perhaps hatred, of that thing.

I worry that this is also happening to God. Between horrible things being done “in God’s name” and the reluctance of people to even engage with the term God in any meaningful way, I worry that we are placing God on an unnecessary and negative pedestal, that we are separating ourselves from God in a way that promotes fear and rejection. Now, I am not saying God is evil like Lord Voldemort, but I do believe that the notion of a God who curses and kills, whether directly or indirectly, is harmful and leaves scars, even if they’re not as visible as Harry Potter’s.

Unfortunately, this understanding of God, as vengeful, as one who curses and kills, as one who allows evil things to happen, as one to be feared, is heavily present in our Jewish tradition. And, it is never more prevalent than now during our High Holiday season. After all, we call it the *Yammim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, possibly fear too.

While God remains “the one who must not be named”, just a short while ago, we described our relationship to God as *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father our King, and, essentially, we begged our Lord to spare us and judge us mercifully. Not much earlier, we traditionally profess “*Un’taneh tokef kedushat hayom* - Let us proclaim the holiness of this day for it is awesome and terrible”. Then, we continue by explaining that today, on Rosh Hashana, God judges “who will live and who will die;” and enumerate “who by fire and who by water; who by war, beast, famine, drought, earthquake, plague, strangling, and stoning.” In this time, we extoll God as *Kadosh v’norah sh’mo*, that “God’s name is holy and terrifying.”

Perhaps the clearest depiction of this “God to be feared” is in today’s Torah portion. In this saga, God decides to test Abraham, and, for the test, God chooses just about the most evil, horrible, unthinkable act. God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Only after Abraham nearly murders his own child does God say “*Al ta’as lo m’umah ki ata yadati ki y’reih Elohim atah* – Do nothing to Isaac, for now I know you fear God.” *Ki y’reih Elohim atah* – That you FEAR God.

I’m sorry, but this sounds like the Dark Lord to me, this sounds like Lord Voldemort, like “he who must not be named.” And, if the goal of God is to be feared, no wonder people are turning away from God, no wonder people fear using God, no wonder some people hate the notion of God. This notion drives people away not only from belief but from Judaism and even

from the Jewish community. If God is about fear, then what is Judaism about and why should I stay connected. This is not the type of God nor Judaism in which I can believe.

And, it does not have to be this way. There are alternative understandings of the term, there are other depictions and descriptions of God, other uses. However, this requires a change in mindset. It requires that we open our minds to notions of God beyond the traditional. It requires us to realize that God is a term and it is up to us to take responsibility for how we use that term. Today of all days, on Rosh Hashanah, as we begin a new year, I believe it is important to take that responsibility seriously and seek out these new understandings. So, today, I offer a few alternatives to “the one who must not be named.”

The first is by Mordecai Kaplan, the founder of the Reconstructionist Movement. He suggests that due to our tradition, due to our stories we are stuck with a traditional view of God as a noun. Stuck with a notion that God is some entity outside of ourselves, outside of the natural universe, something that can be named, that can be identified, that can be the subject and object of actions and verbs. Instead, Kaplan advises that we reconstruct our notion of God and transition from an understanding of God as a noun to God as a verb. Kaplan understands God as the power or the process which creates good in the universe. In this sense, God’s goal is not fear, in fact God cannot have a goal, but rather God is the journey to the goal of redemption, which for Kaplan is achieving one’s highest self-actualization, of becoming our best selves. In this way, God is the process which creates good in the Universe. And, today, as we hope for a good New Year, as we begin a process of improving ourselves through *t’shuvah*, repentance, we can use this notion of God, as the power which makes for good.

The second comes from Martin Buber and his concept of I and Thou. Buber explains that we as humans have two distinct ways of relating to and encountering the world around us. The

first is an I-It encounter. In these interactions, with objects or people, we experience the person or thing in terms of its utility, what is its use and how do we benefit from it. We go to the doctor for them to heal us; we spend time with friends because we enjoy their company. This type of encounter, the I-It, is the space in which we live most of our lives, and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. However, Buber suggests that there is a second type of encounter, which is most often experienced with other people. He calls it the I-You or the I-Thou encounter. In these interactions, we encounter the You, the other person, in their entirety, not as their usefulness nor as a sum of their parts. We experience them, the You, as if they are the whole of creation, for in those encounters we feel larger than two people, larger than an I and a You. We feel as if there is something more in those relationships. According to Buber, that something more is God. In this way, God does not exist outside of people, rather God exists in the relationships between people. So, this week, as we engage in *t'shuvah*, as we try to make amends with others, as we attempt to have I-You encounters, we can use this notion of God, as the something more in our relationships.

Finally, I return to our liturgy, to our tradition, both today and throughout the year. Although these ten days are dominated with the language of “the one who must not be named,” of *Avinu Malkeinu* our father our king, throughout the rest of the year we see very different portrayals of God. In April, during Passover, we are reminded of God’s protection and care for us, for God frees the captive. In January, at Tu B’shvat, we focus on the creation of the world and God’s gift of life. In December, at Chanukah, we celebrate the Festival of Lights and thank God for all the miracles of our world. In just a couple of weeks, immediately following the High Holidays, we will rejoice in Sukkot, when God has commanded, *v’samachta b’chagecha*, Be Happy and Celebrate. Every week on Shabbat, we thank God for rest and renewal. Every day,

we call God the source of peace, healing, and health. Even today, we remind ourselves of the thirteen attributes of God, that God is “compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving and true; showing mercy to the thousandth generation; forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon.”

This is the God that we should name. This is the God that we should focus on, that we should call to mind. The God that creates goodness. The God that exists in the relationships between people. The God that is love and peace, kindness and compassion. This God too is a God to be held with awe. “*Kadosh v'nora sh'mo* – God’s name is holy and awesome”, but this awe comes from care, respect, gratitude and amazement. For, the power of a God of love, in whatever notion you believe, is awesome. This God brings people together in community. This God allows people to conquer fear and hatred. This God is what Judaism and our community is really about.

Love, goodness, and community. These things protected Harry Potter from “he who must not be named,” and, in the end, (sorry, spoilers) Harry Potter defeated Lord Voldemort with this same love, goodness, and community. So, this High Holiday season, may we not be led astray by “the one who must not be named.” May we open our hearts and minds to these alternate understandings of God: the God that creates goodness, the God that exists in the relationships between people, and the God of love. May we embrace these concepts as we work to create a good New Year.

Shanah Tova – May we all have a happy and sweet Rosh Hashanah.