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GOD IS METAPHOR: OR, THE WHOLE TORAH IS GENESIS

Three texts: Genesis 1-3, Pirke Avot 3:14 and a modern text from British philosopher John Gray.

We begin with Genesis (selective from chapters 1-3)

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.....And God said, Let us make man in our image ..... So God created man in his own image.... male and female created he them....And Adonai the God planted a garden ... in Eden; and there he put the man... to work it and to keep it.....And ADONAI commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat... But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you shall not eat of it: for on the day that you eat thereof you will surely die.....Now the serpent was more subtle than any beast of the field .... And he said unto the woman, has God said, you should not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman replied to the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden:

But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God has said, You shall not eat of it, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.

And the serpent said unto the woman, You shall not surely die:

For God knows that in the day you eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food...she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also to her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked.....

TEXT 2-Pirke Avot-3:14

Rabbi Akiba used to say: Beloved is man for he was created in the image [of God]. Especially beloved is he for it was made known to him that he had been created in the image [of God], as it is said: “for in the image of God He made man”

TEXT 3- a modern text

The British philosopher, John Gray writes,

“The story of Adam and Eve eating from the tree of knowledge is a mythical imagining of the ambiguous impact of knowledge on human freedom. Rather than being inherently liberating, knowledge can be used for purposes of enslavement. That is what is meant when having eaten the forbidden apple after the serpent promises they will become like gods, Adam and Eve find themselves exiled from the Garden of Eden and condemned to a life of unceasing labour.” (Seven Types of Atheism p11-12)

Three texts-

1. They tell the creation story of humanity — what Rosh Hashannah celebrates.
2. They are revelation in that they are interpretations of what it means to be human.
3. They point us toward the concept of “covenant” —that which can bind humans together as well as a capital “C” covenant, between humans and God.

This Genesis story is the essence of Rosh Hashanah. “This is the day the world was conceived,” we pray. This day marks humanity’s appearance.

This day likewise celebrates a kind of revelation. The very fact that there is something and we are here to experience it is inspiring.

How many of us then, are in at least partial agreement with Galileo who wrote, “God is known by nature in his works, and by doctrine in his revealed word.” I resonate to this—most especially and easily to the first part, God is revealed in God’s works—all of creation is revelatory or as the Psalmist sang “all of the world is filled with God’s glory.”

Galileo’s second part is a bit harder.

Doctrine? Revealed word?

What is this?-

Genesis — and the eyes of Adam and Eve being “opened?”

Akiba—and it being made “known to us that we are created in God’s image” and this as an example of God’s “love?”

John Gray — and his “inherently liberating” in combination with “unceasing labour?”

What do these mean?

For some of us, it is easier to see raw nature as sacred—but the overlay of words—God’s image, eyes opened? The idea of words—any words being from God poses a challenge.

About seven years ago, I sat in a study session on the theme of revelation and Jewish law with a progressive Orthodox rabbi.

When the moment appeared appropriate, I asked him whether he could describe what is considered God’s revelation at Sinai to me. I asked him what he thought happened. Did a book or scroll come floating down from the sky? Did God speak into Moses’ head so that only Moses could hear and then Moses transcribed everything that became our Torah—both written and oral? What was it that occurred that gave Torah this unique and authoritative status for him?

In response, as I recall he said something like—“I am unable to answer that question.” His deep faith commitment allowed him to maintain the posture that he does towards revelation and therefore the Torah. Torah’s origin are, for him, a miraculous mystery. His commitment to Torah is in some sense unquestioning shrouded in the unknowable akin to the foggy cloud that Torah says covered Mt. Sinai.

This rabbi’s path is hard for many of us to walk. How might we pierce the cloud?  
Is Torah this sort of miracle book?

How about this?

Torah is not a supernatural God given text.

Torah is a deeply human document written, rewritten, preserved and transmitted over centuries.

It is the terms of our covenant—a term also requiring interpretation.

My opening texts of Genesis, Akiba, and Gray all reflect on a relationship between humanity and God. This is what we mean by covenant. Covenant is essential to a Jewish understanding of the human experience. It is conveniently the essence of this season. Covenant is the defining Jewish response to the human condition. This is what Akiba and Gray are pointing to.

The burden of being human is the burden of being an isolated individual self. We each live within our own lives. No one can exactly feel what we feel, think what we think, know who we are. No other can ever fully understand us. The Talmud says it best –

“Our Rabbis taught: [The creation of the first man alone] was to show forth the greatness of the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He. For if a man mints many coins from one mold, they are all alike, but the Holy One, blessed be He, fashioned all men in the mold of the first man, and not one resembles the other...” (B Sanhedrin 38 a)

Each one of us carries something absolutely distinct. This distinctiveness and even more than that—our very awareness of our pure individuality defines the human condition. This is what Akiba means when he says “How great is God’s love for us in making us conscious that we are created in God’s image.” (Avot 3:18) Akiba puts words to our self-awareness.

This is the “knowledge” which for Gray is a kind of unceasing labour. We cannot escape it, though we do try with our endless quest for distractions. These days—Elul, Rosh Hashanah, the Days of Awe, culminating with Yom Kippur—are the days that challenge us to set aside our distractions.

This is difficult because we know this about ourselves. We see it in Genesis. We are a rebellious species. We delight in toys. We delight in everything that distracts us from our deep human responsibilities—what we at Micah term the Human Project, the serious nature of being a holder of God’s image and the accompanying demands. (This is the essence of the biblical prohibition against idolatry.)

The God of Genesis seeks to soothe the stark difficulty of being human.

In Genesis, God, upon seeing for the first time that which God has really created, i.e., Adam’s distinctiveness says—“Lo Tov l’hiyot Adam b’atzmo.” “It is not good for a person to be alone.” From the very beginning, God recognizes human aloneness, the daunting challenge of our taking our lives seriously and seeks to offer assistance. The takeaway message is that the fulfilled life is always in relationship with “other,” likewise uniquely individual and separate selves.

Our lives then unfold as Philosopher Gray’s “unceasing labour,” his term for the responsibilities that accompany any covenant.

Covenant, is our Jewish word for the deep human response to the essential aloneness of the human condition.

Covenant—we yearn for connection. We long further to be embedded in a community of others with whom we can share our angst, our hopes, our fears, our desires, our aspirations and dreams. If this season celebrates or recognizes anything, it is our very essential humanity.

This is what we desire in our quest for community. This is what we seek within the experience of being part of Temple Micah—an interconnected and supportive web of entanglement. That is people who in some way feel that which we feel, fear what we fear—people whom we sense we share something of the deepest part of our very humanness. This is Avishai Margalit’s quest for thick relations. Face to face connection.

These connections can also be formed, according to Margalit through the memories of shared experiences. Margalit points out—that shared memories need not entail shared experiences. For example, two cousins—living far from each other—can have shared memories about shared grandparents that they hear through the stories their respective parents tell them about those shared grandparents. Cousins and extended family who live far from each other can feel a deep closeness when they are together because of this kind of sharing. Shared memories through stories told and re-told create human bonds, forge human relationships, and come to bind communities.

This is the Jewish experience in history writ large. We share the Jewish story—this is our narrative that binds us together as the people that stood at Sinai –so to speak. This is the horizontal Jewish covenant—we feel a connection to Jews worldwide thru the shared Jewish story, told and re-told thru generation to generation. This story-sharing covenant binds us to the Jews of the past.

Any relationship carries obligation. Bringing your full self to the other is a task—a sacred one.

This is Jewish covenant. The burden of not being alone brings the burden of covenantal responsibility.

So....

We yearn also for more—the Jewish covenantal relationship seeks uplift—what we might call transcendence. We yearn not only for a covenant with others; we want a covenant with God. A vertical covenant so to speak. Even as we crave social connection with “others,” we know that we also long for the Eternal –a deep mooring that provides moral purpose, moral reassurance, real meaning — and this is possible only if the covenantal connection extends to God. We seek inspiration. To state it more succinctly, covenant with God is the Jewish response to ultimate human existential loneliness. Covenant is the Jewish response that the pursuit of the moral life matters—or what I like to say, that being human is being part of an eternal project.

Faith is the quest for a guarantee. We long for our lives to somehow matter.

God is the guarantor that the life labor for meaning is itself meaningful.

This “labor” is the very angst of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik’s Adam II, of whom I spoke at this season several years ago. Adam II is the yearning soulfulness within all of us that searches for more. It lies within each and every one of us. It is what we seek to both unlock and unravel in these very days. If we are lucky, this yearning finds expression in moments of prayer—the words—“How glorious are your tents dear Jacob”, “Remember us for life dear God who is passionate for life,” or perhaps it is the familiar melodies that fulfill these days for us. (Hum Kol Nidre, Avinu Malkein, selach lanu). Perhaps it is the primal call of the shofar—the scream with no words but seems to echo forever that most fully captures or expresses our yearning.

Or simply put, as:

Wittgenstein wrote, “To believe in God means to see that the facts of the world are not the end of the matter. To believe in God means that life has meaning.” (Notebooks—in Sherwin p72)

We could end our conversation here and conclude that the power of Rosh Hashannah lies in our understanding of how our covenant with God and our belief in God ultimately means that life has meaning. But I believe we have one more step before us. I know and love our Micah community. As such, I know us to be a community filled with devout Jewish doubters in God.

Please know I do not see this as a negative at all. It is instead for me, a delightful invitation that has enlivened my time here for these many years. Let us seek therefore to more fully recognize the nature of the human experience as we seek to consider one more thing — the concept of God as metaphor.

To clarify- Usually, when discussing God and metaphor, we are talking about metaphors for God: shepherd, healer, rock, and so many more. During the High Holy Days we repeat over and over again, for example, Avinu Malkeinu, Parent and Sovereign. I want to go even a bit farther today.

Maimonides warned us against picturing God: We’ll never know what God is, he taught. We can, at best capture what God is not. This becomes Maimonides theology of seeking to understand God through negative attributes. He prefers simply to say what God is not.

Lauren Winner, a contemporary theologian, in considering the same infinite God, takes a different approach. She believes that the reason there are so many metaphors for God is to remind us that no single one of these images is able to capture who or what God is.

What about our coming to the understanding that there is no human thought without metaphor?

We humans are constructed in such a way that we are compelled to think about “the facts of the world” metaphorically.

What if God is metaphor?

That is the message of the burning bush when Moses asks God, God’s name. God’s name at the burning bush? YHWH “WasIsWillbe” –all as one.

The Torah’s name for God at the Burning Bush is our ancestor’s most brilliant metaphor—YHWH is Being-endless being.

God is the infinite beyond.

Being-Endless Being. An attempt to capture, metaphor itself.

“God” is the word, the concept, the idea, the being, the reality—I am never sure how to phrase it-- that captures the pre-modern preference for external metaphors, the world view that believes there are real sort of magical forces and beings outside the self that influence people and thus the course of the world. This is the world that Max Weber termed “a great enchanted garden.” In this world there are leprechauns, angels, sprites, demons and the like. This same pre-modern world gave us the Torah and its conception of God.

To the modern way of thinking—these are all metaphors. Think of the saying—“The devil made me do it,” a pre-modern metaphor at work. Now hold that thought.

Larry Hoffman pointed out to me that our world, “Modernity” prefers interior metaphors to exterior ones. In other words, we accept the notion of interior forces within the self that influence individuals and thus the course of the world.

We thus can understand the pre-modern preference for “the devil made me do it” vs. the modern, “My own interior mental struggle, my ego, led me to my inappropriate behavior.” Or, with regard to today’s Torah portion:

“God commanded Abraham take your son whom you love and offer him up to me as a sacrifice.”

Vs.

Abraham's conscience motivated him to take his son....

Both interpretations of Abraham's situation are metaphorical statements.

How might we then understand this morning's portion through this modern prism of God as internal metaphor?

What about this re-write of the biblical story?

Abraham could not sleep. He loved God with a deep and passionate certainty. He knew that this one God was the defining standard of the human experience and that this God was a God of mercy and justice—and yet. And yet.... Abraham now had a miracle in his home, his young son Isaac whom he adored beyond all else. This child, miracle son of his beloved Sarah, whom they had believed was a bit too old for child bearing, this Isaac had become the center of his life.

A voice crept into him—as he asked himself at night, “Do I love Isaac, little, defenseless Isaac more than I love God?” “If I am to love God above all else, what of my devotion to and my adoration for little Isaac, that miracle, dream who carries my future?

How can I love anything before this voice that comes to me in the night for whom I have left family and birthplace and home?

Isaac must be a test—Is my devotion to Isaac greater even than my devotion to God?

I must take Isaac from this home, from his mother and prove to myself my devotion to God for whom I have given everything.

There can be no doubting that my commitment to God is greater even than my commitment to Isaac.

Abraham and Isaac journey for three days. Abraham is searching for the right place and he sees a mountain in the distance. I will show my devotion there. There is clarity on the mountain top.

And sure enough it is there, where Abraham's God reveals an even deeper mystery to Abraham. A voice inside Abraham's head called to him, “Love is not a competition. Love is never a competition. Love is boundless. Love feeds love. Love models love!” Abraham came to see that his love for Isaac and his love for God reinforce each other. Love is that quality which like the universe can be endlessly flowing with no exhaustion.

Abraham comes off the mountain certain in his love for God—passionate in his love for his son, Isaac.

This is the great understanding of this morning's portion.

The point is that the possibility for love is limitless: Loving one does not diminish loving another.

The Torah's metaphor of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son and then the angel calling a halt, is now understood as Abraham coming to a deeper understanding of the human capacity for love. It is never a competition and with that comes a deeper understanding of Faith and the human experience.

It reflects that deep part of each one of us that is our self-consciousness.

As Christian Smith writes:

"Human(s) are moral animals... we ...not only have desires, beliefs, and feelings (which often have strong moral qualities) but also the ability ... to form strong evaluations about our desires, beliefs, and feelings that hold the potential to transform them....on moral grounds."

For our ancestors, this was the voice of God. We see things one way and then upon deeper reflection we come to a new, deeper understanding and change our minds.

We see this from our earliest texts. We are led astray, witness the serpent. We are subject to jealousies, witness Cain. We so easily slide into idolatry, both personally and as a group, witness the Golden Calf.

God is that voice within that gives us pause, which quietly asks that we broaden our horizon and look outside ourselves. Think of Elijah and the "still, small voice."

God is metaphor in that God is infinite being—"WasnessIsnessWillbeness." God is infinite love.

Love is the very engine inside of us that enables us to forge covenantal relationships. It pushes us to be in relationship. We long to love. We long to be loved.

Torah? Revelation?

Knowledge, like love, is that which can be shared and only increases with such sharing.

Darkness, ignorance, hate are our nightmares. They are the company of Idolatry

Our God is a God of learning, love and light.

It is all there in the opening story of Torah. God says let there be light. God makes us aware that we are made in God's image, our eyes are opened with self awareness and we leave the Garden to do God's work in the world.

Open eyes let in light. Adam and Eve's eyes were opened!

The challenge for modern religion today is how to make our voice strong. How do we fashion a coherent structure that makes our God's voice a plausible one, an inspiring one in our personal lives and the lives of our communities? How do we each make the voice of the Garden, the voice of Sinai reverberate passionately in our own lived lives? How do we shut out the noise and listen to the voice within? How do we make our communities places overflowing with love?

So---

Torah—is the canonization of the ancient Jewish people's collective sifting through the moral decisions passed on over time and then forged into a canon of legend, lore and law and delivered to us as a symbol of God's love.

Torah- is the Jewish way we are to live in loving covenant with others inspired by the human predicament of "aloneness" and the insatiable human quest for a moral life of meaning.

This is how and why we gather in community on these days.

This season celebrates creation, revelation, and covenant.

We celebrate God as learning, light, and love.

We celebrate our deep humanity.

We celebrate the confounding contradictions that lie at the heart of all human experience, "the facts of the world are not the end of the matter."

Can we enact and embrace a ritual life that both creates and affirms this deep understanding?

Can we together fully enter these holy days?

Zochreinu l'chayim—melech chafets b'chayim—Remember us unto Life—o Sovereign who delights in life.

We pray for life while confronting our contradictions.

We ask to be remembered as we remember those who are no longer with us.

We count our days as we ask ourselves how to make our days count for something.

We surround ourselves with those we most love as we embrace those who we do not see often enough.

We connect with the eternal questions.

We pray for more time-

More love

More peace

More life

For ourselves

For our friends

For the projects that await us.

And we pray to an ever present yet elusive God who delights in it all.

Shannah Tovah!

AMEN