

Noa Simon-Latz, Parshat Miketz, December 31, 2016

“What does Jewish life look like for a Jewish person who doesn’t believe in God?”

Great question. I’m going to offer two answers, both of them from my Reconstructionist education, based in the work of Rabbi Mordechai Kaplan of blessed memory. In the first, I’ll directly answer your question. Then I’ll take your question for a little spin.

Belief in a specific understanding of God is essential in some religions. For example, belief in Jesus is what makes someone Christian, belief in Allah is what makes someone Muslim. The same is not true of Jewish religious identity. In Judaism, think of a three-legged stool, held up by three distinct but connected ways to be Jewish: belonging, behaving, and believing.

Belonging: look around the room, Noa. You belong here, it’s your place, and your people. The Jewish people are your family, as simple as that. And your Jewish family – from immediate relatives to your “aunties” and “uncles”, to your Shir Tikvah community, to the wider Jewish world including Israel – no matter what you do, you belong here, you have a home, a support system, and people who love you. As a young adult, the more actively you participate, the more deeply you’ll know you belong, because showing up leads naturally to more connection, more belonging. And this community needs your presence and your voice, just because you’re you.

Behaving: your dads have modeled for you that Judaism calls us to moral courage, radical welcoming, working toward a more just world. I’ve seen how you, among your own peers, are inclusive and welcoming. You, too, are behaving as a Jew, when you look around and in your quiet way make sure that other kids feel that they belong. Behaving also includes showing up, applying the values of Jewish tradition, within and outside our community, fully deeply rooted in your

Jewish identity. Behaving also includes ritual actions – at home, like lighting Shabbat candles, or at Shir Tikvah, reading Torah or singing in the choir. As you get older, you, Noa, will have a chance to decide how you want to observe Shabbat.

Believing: the belief part isn't just about God, and it's certainly not about believing a literal reading of the Torah. It's about believing that there is an inherent worth and meaning to what we're doing here together, believing that Jewish life matters, that you matter as someone engaged in the conversation about what Jewish life is and what it can be.

Okay, so that's part one. Now let's get more personal.

Noa, you've asked about what Jewish life looks like for a Jew who doesn't believe in God of a rabbi who not only believes in God, but who asked God for help in answering your question and invoked God's presence here with us today. I haven't really been private about that. And you know there are many great role models in this community, including MJ who stood right here just two and a half months ago with a powerful, deeply Jewish Yom Kippur sermon in which she "came out" as a non-God-believer – which there is ample space to do as a deeply engaged Jew.

But you asked me, so I'd like to share with you a few of the ways I understand God that might resolve your question without needing to say, "I don't believe in God." It starts with who or what we imagine God to be. When I asked you to tell me about the God you don't believe in, you said you don't believe in a spirit [out there] or the Creation stories. Good Jewish answer, and I'm with you.

When we talked more about a force you might believe in, you answered, "everybody's love is the spirit" and "maybe Love is God". Bingo – you've got it. Let's look at what's implied in what you said, equating love with God:

1. Love is within people. It's not some force "out there", it's not an abstract concept of theology or an independent being who controls us or abandons us.
2. Love is between people, not vertical and power-oriented, but heart-based and horizontal, an equalizer and humanizer.
3. By choosing "love" as the attribute that is God, you're recognizing there is something charged there, something that is harder to pin down, and not completely controllable by our own will,

Living Jewishly means continuing to develop the interplay between the teachings and practices of our tradition and what your own heart tells you, just as you described in your d'var-Torah. When you regret something, when your conscience says "that wasn't okay" and you decide to change your ways – what is that energy within you? That's what I call God.

All this is to say that God's home is right here, in our bodies, in the physicality of our lives, our actions, our relationships. The in-dwelling presence of God – known also as the *Shechina* – is inseparable from us and our lived lives, in our bodies and in our actions. Our job as Jewish people is to channel godly attributes (the qualities that we know both through our teachings and our intuition are holy) – love, creative expression, moral activism, into the world.

Noa, you are a living answer to your own question. Maybe you'll wrestle with the question of God your whole life and still be living a vibrant Jewish life. Today you have claimed your voice as part of the next generation of Jewish people who wrestle with God and truth and conscience. You have shown us how you belong, behave, and believe as a Jew. Thank God!

Thank you for asking a rich and meaningful question, and mazal tov!!!