

Trying to Understand God: Parashat Yitro

Faith, spirituality and religion are hardly the same thing.

About 2,000 years ago, Aristotle declared that God exists and that God brought everything into being. Aristotle was hardly a Jew. He did not know from davening three times each day, nor keeping kosher or celebrating Shabbat and the holidays. But he looked at the world and believed that, through scientific discovery and through reason, one could trace the origin of everything in this world back to a single point in time:

A First Cause that brought everything into being.

Nearly a thousand years ago in Egypt, the Jewish Aristotelian philosopher, doctor, fully observant Jew, and one of the greatest rabbinic minds, Moshe ben Maimon – Maimonides or Rambam – agreed with Aristotle:

“The Foundation of Foundations and the Pillar of all Wisdom is to know that there is a First Cause, that [this First Cause] brought everything else into existence, and that everything that exists, from the heavens to the earth and everything that is in them would not exist were not [this First Cause’s] existence true” [Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Yesodei HaTorah, 1:1, translated by Micah Goodman].

That “First Cause” is God and everything else is science and reason.

In fact, Maimonides argues that science proves God’s existence. As Professor Micah Goodman, lecturer at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and scholar at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem explains in his book which I am currently reading, *Maimonides and the Book that Changed Judaism*, Maimonides looked to the moon and the planets and argued that the infinite movement of the cosmos must have a source that is also infinite because something finite cannot create something infinite (pgs. 7-8).

That First Cause is God and everything else is science and reason.

Faith and spirituality can stand on their own. However, when one seeks to communicate that faith to another person or when one desires to live his/her faith in such a way that impacts another person, that is religion.

And religion can be a force for good. Of course, as we all know too well, religion can be a force for evil as well.

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Yitro, we read *Aseret HaDibrot* – often referred to as the “Ten Commandments” – which first and foremost proclaims, “I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage” (Exodus 20:2).

Faith in God is at the core of what it means to be a Jew ... but it is also faith in a God who acts in history and for the sake of humankind.

As the Jewish philosopher Yehudah HaLevi argued one generation prior to Maimonides, “God as First Cause is a God reached by intellectual speculation, a God of metaphysics. But a God who acts in history, a God who frees the enslaved, is a God for whom the soul yearns” (*Etz Hayim*, pg. 443).

As we contemplate then the nature of God, do you believe in a “clock-maker” God, who set the world into motion and then stepped back to (proverbially) watch what happens? Or do you believe in a God who laughs and who cries, who experiences anger, joy and sadness: a God who then acts on those “emotions” for the betterment of the Jews? Of humanity? Of all Creation?

I invite you this week in which we read the Ten Commandments to join me in wrestling with the very first of those ten – the existence of God and the extent to which God acts or does not act in this world, and to respond to this email to let me know your thoughts.

Rebecca, Caleb and Ayal join me in wishing you *Shabbat shalom um'vorach*: a peaceful and blessed Sabbath.

Rabbi Aaron Starr
February 13, 2020