

D'var Rav: Words from the Rabbi

LET'S GET OVER OURSELVES

Welcome back to each and every one of you. I hope that everyone had wonderful summers, as now we prepare for the Days of Awe and the 5768 Jewish season.

Sadly, the world continues to roil with violence, and one obvious (and age-old) question that comes up over and over again among those of us who live in this disturbing era is: *Where is God in the face of all this horror?* That's a valid question, and a profound challenge to those of us who do believe in the reality of God.

But we mustn't fall prey to the current trend in our culture on this key issue—the false dichotomies of either a rigid fundamentalism or a dogmatic atheism. Tragically, at times horrifically, we see the fruits of the former ideology every night on television. Yet the latter worldview, while not as gruesome or dangerous, is still disturbing, still a symptom of the kind of closed-mindedness that can slide toward its own form of extremism. Many recent best-selling “religion” books have been mercilessly devoted to attacking and trying to debunk any grounds whatsoever for believing in a higher power. For these authors, belief in God is treated either as primitive or completely idiotic.

The anger and smugness in these books is palpable, and they say far more about the authors than they do about God's existence.

In violent and divisive times like these, especially, we need to have open minds. We are all too aware of the closed-mindedness and dangers of religious fundamentalists and extremists. But let's be honest with ourselves. There are a lot of people out there who are just as dogmatic and "fundamentalist" about their atheism. Yet neither religious fundamentalism nor secular dogmatism is the answer—they're both too easy, and neither will ultimately make this world the kind of world that most of us want to live in.

I believe that a “skeptical theism” might prove to be our best approach to the God question in this unsettling century. Rav Kook, Israel's first Chief Rabbi, argued that, to look at the world—with all its violence, suffering, and injustice—and *not* experience at least a flicker of what he termed “temporary atheism” was itself as sin, for it demonstrated a hardened and indifferent heart. Having serious doubts about God's presence and/or existence, according to Rav Kook, is not only acceptable—it is a sign of an insightful, sensitive, and empathetic soul.

In other words, ambiguity, even in matters of faith, is okay.

Here's the bottom line: To believe in the existence of a living God in this overly rationalistic, narcissistic, and materialistic day and age—even a God we can wrestle with, question, confront, and sometimes doubt—is about as countercultural, even radical, as it

gets. But it is also our best (and perhaps last) bet for trying to construct the world of compassion, meaning, and hope that so many of us so desperately crave.

And so, this new Jewish year, challenge your long-held assumptions. Question your own authority. Pry open your minds and watch as they stretch your souls. . . .

B'shalom, Niles