

Kol Nidre 5776

¹When many of us were younger, we were told that God was a strict disciplinarian.

When many of us were younger we were told that God was a white man in a white robe with a long flowing beard in a big chair sitting somewhere up there.

When many of us were younger we were told that God is an “omni” God in control of everything: all-knowing “omniscient”; all good “omnibeneficient”; and all powerful “omnipotent.”

When many of us were younger when horrible things happened, we were told it was “God’s will.”

When we speak and think about God by reverting to the “omnis” or the “bad things happening” we find ourselves painted into a corner,

a corner that does not reflect our experience of living in a world that still has so much suffering, so much evil in it.

Yet we internalized many of these ideas about God when we think, if we think, about God.

¹ Harold M. Schulweis, “From God to Godliness: Proposal for a Predicate Theology,” *The Reconstructionist* 41:1, pp. 16-26. ©Jewish Reconstructionist Federation, Wyncote, PA 19095.

They may reflect how those who spoke about God earlier in our lives genuinely understood God and the world they were living in.

Some of them even came up with the idea of theodicy, meaning that because of God's omnipotence the evil in the world could not be from God.

One could even call many of these ideas about God "pediatric" as many of us took them to heart when we were younger.

Still. . .

When we think closely about our lives in the here and now they are really not workable, especially as we think about what role, if any, God had in the Shoah, the most horrific and permanent disaster to ever challenge our people.

These are theologies, created by human beings, to grasp at the who and what that God may be.

Yet as we have gained more life, we also realize that we do not understand why so much of the world continues to foster evil,

why horrible things happen all the time to so many people, in our own lives, in the Jewish world, in the world at large.

Alas, defending God with theodicy or not, many Jews have voted with their feet, choosing to abandon faith, prayer and Jewish life.

Trying to make sense of the evil in the world and where it comes from vexes us.

Except for absenting ourselves from thinking about God, we have not really given much thought to the question: “what or who is God?”

Tonight, I am going to share with you an alternative theology, one that works for me, and I hope it will work for you.

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It is called Predicate Theology.

Predicate theology focuses on the attributes of godliness, not on the “who” or “what” is God.

In doing so, it allows us to develop a relationship with our God understandings that are understandable, accessible, meaningful, and approachable.

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Predicate theology asks us to focus on the attributes of God, godliness, not as a subject, but as a verb.

First, why do we think about God as subject?

Our prayer language almost universally supports the idea of God as the actor, not the result:

“Blessed are You (subject) YHVH our God (subject) melekh ha-Olam (subject) who. . .

This blessing form, so familiar to all of us, is based on a formulation ordained, according to the Talmud, by the “Men of the Great Assembly” nearly 2,500 years ago.

You can see how seductive it is with this blessing formulation that cast God as subject to make God responsible for everything in the world.

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Predicate theology turns God from subject to verb.

It begins with the premise that God, whatever God is, remains essentially unknowable.

This unknowability is why I often use words that intentionally repel each other, similar to when you place two magnets next to each other and they push back.

God is everything, God is nothing.

God is in us, God is out of us.

God speaks, God is silent.

God is above us, God is below us.

God is, God is not.

It is impossible to use language to describe what God is or is not.

Given language's fundamental deficiency of almost always speaking of God as the subject: a Person, Being, Power or Process, predicate theology offers a brilliant answer to our lack of being able to "know God."

Let's get into it.

In formulating Predicate Theology, an idea that originated with Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan, Rabbi Harold Schulweis, a great thinker who we lost in this past year, would often ask people how many could subscribe to the belief that God is just, merciful and good; that it is this God who uplifts the fallen, heals the sick and loosens the fetters of the bound."

That question was generally met with reluctance, often with agnostic reserve and frequently with strong denial.

Then Rabbi Schulweis would ask how many would affirm that justice, mercy and goodness are godly; that uplifting the fallen, healing the sick and loosening the fetters of the bound are divine?

Here he received a largely positive and often enthusiastic response.

You can see the power of predicate theology. God is not the actor, we are. And in so doing, we can resolve our issues with God as we may have thought about him using theologies, many of which originated before the Shoah.

Rabbi Schulweis suggests, in understanding Predicate Theology as being about godliness that this “offers a way to relate **positively** to divinity and its celebration in prayer and ritual.”² Indeed.

This is a shift to what we experience as

“godliness:” those qualities or virtues that are “godlike” or divine”

It is meant for the many of us who cannot go home again using the old routes, may learn to believe and pray and celebrate through our understandings of godliness.

Further elucidating what he means Rabbi Schulweis’s writes in his book *Evil and the Morality of God*:

“The humanly comprehensible qualities of goodness, love, intelligence and creativity are godly. . . they themselves are worthy of adoration, cultivation and emulation in the lives of the believers.”

² Schulweis.

Worthy of adoration, cultivation and emulation in the lives of the believers.

What we do in our lives is real to us.

Our tradition exhorts to time and again act as God would act. Predicate Theology makes the actions the connection.

Many of you probably have read *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* by Rabbi Harold Kushner. He wrote the book after hearing of his son's medical diagnosis.

Here, Rabbi Kushner makes sense of how the world works, how we understand godliness, by writing:

“Predicate theology” means that when we find statements about God that say for example, “God is love, God is truth, God is the friend of the poor,” we are to concentrate on the predicate (the action) rather than on the subject.

Those are not statements about God; they are statements about love, truth and befriending the poor, telling us that those are divine activities, moments in which God is present...They are not things that God does; they are things that we do, and when we do them, God is present in our lives.³

³ Kushner, Harold, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, 1981.

Love, truth and befriending the poor: these moments when God is made manifest are moments that we enact.

It is we who are affecting godly attributes in real time.

Powerful.

How we think about God is critical to how we see ourselves as part of the Jewish community. Many of us, I would venture, do not spend a great deal of time thinking about God and when we do, it is often not positive.

This is unfortunate.

Predicate theology is your way back.

Predicate theology gives you your path for affirming your Jewishness, as Rabbi Schulweiss says, “Offers a way to relate **positively** to divinity and its celebration in prayer and ritual.”

Strongly echoing Rabbi Schulweiss’s call is Rabbi David A. Cooper. In his book *God is a Verb* Rabbi Cooper tells us that our perceptions about God actually **undermine** our spiritual development.

He challenges us to rethink:

God is not what we think it is. God is not a thing, a being, a noun. It does not exist, as existence is defined for it takes up no space and is not bound by time.

Jewish mystics often refer to it as *Ein Sof*, which means Endlessness. The closest thing we can come to thinking about God is as a process rather than a being.

We can think of it as “be-ing,” as verb rather than noun. Perhaps we could understand this concept better if we renamed God. We might call it God-in, a process, rather than God, which suggests a noun.”⁴

Godliness as verb, a process, a be-ing.

Godliness is when we strengthen people in our lives.

Godliness is when we act on the needs of the poor.

Godliness is when we pursue justice, ensuring that it is fair.

We turn our understandings of God to action.

This is your invitation.

Adopt predicate theology as your way of thinking about godliness, the verb, the doing.

⁴ Cooper, David, *God is a Verb*, Riverhead Books, 1998.

Invigorate your Judaism.

It is a theology that works.

As Rabbi Schulweis would say:

“We are an old-new people and we require old-new ways to renew our connection with our ancestors’ faith.

“From Elohim (God) to Elohit (godliness) is not a path away, but towards our spiritual renewal and reconciliation. “

May it be so.