

## Rosh haShana and the Blessings of Monotheism

The image of God as the Sole Ruler of the universe is so common to religious people nowadays that it hardly seems an exciting innovation. However, once upon a time monotheism was a revolutionary thought. And it is still for some people, even in our days.

In the last few weeks, I was presented with questions posed by two people independently. The first was from a young Hindu man in India, by the name of Dhirendra. His question was: "What made you choose only one God?" The second questioner was an Animist from Central Africa named Koyagere, who added: "Is the One God responsible for everything, or does He have helpers?"

Believe it or not, these two people had never talked to monotheists before about these matters. As for me, I was excited to find out more about the world view of polytheists. Dhirendra explained to me that the main three Hindu gods are: \*a creator god, \*a preserver god, and \*a destroyer god, but that there are many more. Most of the Hindu gods work together, but they can also end up in fights which then cause great disaster. Especially the destroyer god should not be angered.

Koyagere too, told me that his religion knows many gods, and no god is above the other: There is a hunting god to whom sacrifices are brought in dancing ceremonies. There is the god of death. There is a god who created humans, a god of thunder, a god that eats misbehaving children, a god of rain, and floods. Gods of wind, growth, reproduction, peace, war, etc.

Once upon a time, our ancestors too lived in a world where this was the normal way to look at things: There were many gods and each one had their specialty: fertility, rain, victory. If one particular god would not deliver, you could choose to worship another one and go to him or her for help.

A very important difference between this worldview and ours is: In a universe

with multiple gods, each god only has a limited scope of influence. There can be no single one god that holds all power. If you turn to one specific god for help or assistance, there is no way to know if you turned to the right one. Perhaps that god is outsmarted or out-competed by another.

Aristotle explained about the Greek gods that they were not really concerned with humans. They knew jealousy, pride, lust or anger, but no affection for us mortals. Most gods were quite undependable, often capricious and sometimes amoral. At times they kept their word, at others they lied. Gods could provide humans with blessings, or they could harm them for no apparent reason. In other words, they could not be counted on.

It is very profound that Judaism introduced Monotheism and proclaimed to the world the existence of only One God. When HaShem is King of the entire universe, that means we know who to turn to, and what is more, if “He’s got the whole world in His hand” (as the Gospel song goes), then there is no heavenly anarchy or divine competition. There is an overall, universal plan, a dependable consistency.

Also because of this, if the universe is created essentially good (as the Torah teaches), this means that God is on the side of goodness. He is good and promotes what is good.

This means: He demands from us ethical behavior!!! While the gods of paganism were not interested in the moral interactions between humans, our God is concerned with our conduct as individuals and as a people.

But monotheism has its problems too. For instance, the existence of evil is specifically a problem for monotheism. In a polytheistic world you can always blame the other god, the one you don’t like. If there is only One God, then He seems to be somehow responsible for the existence of evil. Jewish philosophers have come up with different solutions to this problem that may or may not satisfy us.

Another problem for monotheism is that it seems easier to relate to gods in human proportions and much harder to worship an elevated a God that surpasses all our imagination. Pure monotheism that does not portray God in human terms is much more demanding and harder to achieve. Even the people of Israel slid back into idolatry many times. Of course, we may imagine God (as the Bible does) as a King. Or we can think of Him as a Judge, a Counselor, a Nourisher, and a caring Parent.

Therefore, today, we receive the message of *Malkhut* (Kingship). We may perceive God as Supreme King: There is no heavenly anarchy.

But this comes along with the prayers of *Zikhronot* (Remembrance), testifying that HaShem is responsive to our prayers, dependable, and that He keeps His promises and His covenant.

And with it comes the sound of the *Shofar*, which reminds us of the instances of God's interaction with His creatures: In the past, when the sound was heard at Mount Sinai, in the present, and in the future.

May today's prayers to the Supreme King of kings who stands for goodness, inspire us *towards* goodness. And may the sound of the Shofar sharpen our mind and prepare our souls towards a higher level of dedication and ethical conduct.