

My Troubles with God; God's Troubles with Me

February 9, 1979

This Friday evening sermon reveals Leonard Beerman's unusual candor as a rabbi. He openly confesses to finding little meaning in conventional ideas of God. He unfolds this idea through a series of autobiographical insights, beginning with the innocent prayers he offered as a young boy on behalf of his family through his more mature encounters with theological arguments and doubts. To an extent, the poles of this internal debate are marked off by Beerman's frequent attraction to the Dutch philosopher Spinoza, whose view of God as nature appealed to him, and the recurrent problem of theodicy. Throughout his life, Beerman could not leave behind him the question of how a just God could allow for such misery and barbarity in the world. He formulated this query in an age when thinkers had begun to develop the "death of God" theological tradition, associated in the Jewish tradition with Richard L. Rubinstein (with whom Beerman once had a tense exchange over Franklin Delano Roosevelt).

In sharing his own meditations with his congregants, Beerman engages a host of prominent thinkers from Marx to Leo Baeck. He ends up less of an atheist shorn of all belief than an agnostic for whom struggling with the idea of God is itself an essential vocation of the Jew. Like the biblical Jacob, whose adopted name of Israel means "to struggle with God," Beerman here displays honesty and integrity in attempting to make sense both of his theology and his profession.

The ancient rabbis tell us that Judaism stands on three pillars: on Torah (or study), on Prayer, and on the Practice of Good Deeds. Corresponding to these are the names of the synagogue: a house of study, a house of prayer, and a house of democratic assembly. But not only does Judaism stand on prayer, study, and good deeds, but also on God, Torah, and Israel.

Judaism stands on three pillars, but does your Judaism, rabbi, stand on all three? A person can stand on two legs, but can a Jew stand on good deeds and study, without prayer? Or can one be concerned with Torah, and the Jewish people, and not believe in God? Such are the problems of rabbis but I sense that they afflict many Jews. Most of us have problems with God. I have always had them, ever since I left my childhood behind me. Somewhere in my childhood (did this happen to you as well?) I learned that God had a human form, although he couldn't be seen; that he was all-powerful and all-good, and that he knew everything I did, and that He judged everyone by his acts; that He rewarded and He punished, that He was there . . .¹

I am not a theologian, nor am I the son of a theologian, but just an ordinary congregational rabbi, as all of you know. Years ago—exactly ten years ago—when my friend Richard Levy was assistant rabbi here at Leo Baeck Temple, he described one of the frequent and important functions of the rabbi of this congregation, which was to serve as a tour guide. And, like all tour guides, after a time you developed a kind of pattern, explaining to the visitors who came to this congregation, how all the light switches of this Temple are on the opposite end of the room from the entrance and how the architects thoughtfully provided a diversion for dull sermons, by allowing wandering minds to count the holes over the ark. Richard used to say that the part of the tour he likes the most was the little sermon he developed for the three sets of doors directly facing the main entrance to the Temple; and if you are ever called upon to conduct a tour of our synagogue, here's a ready-made sermon for all of you to use. And this is how it goes:

The ancient rabbis tell us that Judaism stands on three pillars: on Torah (or study), on Prayer, and on the Practice of Good Deeds. Corresponding to these are the names of the synagogue: a house of study, a house of prayer, and a house of democratic assembly: Bet Midrash, Bet Tefila, Bet Kneset. You open our sanctuary door and there you introduce the tourist to the house of prayer. You open the social hall door and show them the house of meeting, or democratic assembly. And you open the library door and you show them the house of study. Then you go on to say that not only does Judaism stand on prayer, study, and good deeds; but also on God, Torah, and Israel. And then off the grateful tourists will go, leaving you behind to ruminate on what you've just told the visitor. Judaism stands on three things: but, does your Judaism, rabbi, stand on all three? A person can stand on two legs. Can a Jew stand on good deeds and study, without prayer? Or can't one be concerned with Torah, and the Jewish people, and not believe in God? Such are the problems of rabbinic tour guides. Perhaps they will not afflict you when your turn comes. But I sense that most of us have problems with God. I have always had them, ever since I left my childhood behind me. Somewhere in my childhood and perhaps this happened to you as well, somewhere I learned that God had a human form although he couldn't be seen; that he was all-powerful and all-good,

and that he knew everything I did, and that he judged everyone by his acts; that he rewarded and he punished, that he was there in time of danger and sorrow; that there was a purpose behind everything that happened, even though I could not always understand it; and that he was a loving Father, or rather a Grandfather, sometimes with a white beard, distant and near, someone who answered when you prayed even though the answer was sometimes “No.” And every night before I went to sleep I prayed the same prayer to this God, a prayer which my parents taught me. It calmed my fear of the night and of the darkness that sleep would always bring. I said it for so many years of my childhood that I remember it still. And this is the way it went.

Before I sleep I close my eyes
 To Thee, oh God, my thoughts arise
 I thank thee for the blessings all
 Which come to us, thy children small.

And then, very quickly, I blessed all the members of my family, the most recently born, the last: God bless mommy–daddy–sissie–grandma–Jackie. And then, *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad*—in the old Askenazic way—Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

That was the prayer I prayed every night. And especially before tests in school—and tennis matches, when I was thirteen. I prayed when my sister lay bleeding from a rare blood disease, when I had typhoid fever after swimming in the filthy Shiawasee River that meandered through the small Michigan town of my grammar school days. But somehow, as I grew up, I began to have troubles with this God. I suppose it was because I couldn’t understand why he let so many troubles come to the young and the helpless, why there was so much pain around, why there was so much disease and poverty . . . war and famine and cruelty. I learned along the way, some history and science. I read some philosophy. That did it. The old, simple, naïve theology of my childhood gave way before this learning. The God of my childhood was soon as outdated as my childhood.

In college I had to learn the proofs of Anselm and Aquinas, and how to demolish them. God became for me a matter for speculation and rejection, and then forgotten altogether. Oh, in my home we welcomed Shabbas and Pessah. I recited the *motzi* and *Bore Pree Hagoffen* every Shabbas. We avoided the forbidden foods. We ate the matzo and scorned the bread. I was bored, like most of the young people in my town, by Rosh Hashannah and Yom Kippur. But we were Jews, and I didn’t think too much about it—until, in my senior year of college, when uncertain about the direction I must take, I left school, tramped around the country for some six months, found a job, and then, lonely, found my way to a shelf of Jewish books in the public library in a small town far from home, and began devouring with a strange, relentless pleasure, literature, history, philosophy, theology—all Jewish—and knew suddenly that I had found a possible direction for myself—to become a rabbi.

I returned to college for my final year, discussed the matter with my closest friend, who would go on to become a psychoanalyst. I remember his shocking declaration—"You can't become a rabbi—You don't believe in God." "By God, you're right," I said. "I must go and find one"—and with the passionate innocence that delayed adolescents wear, I poured over books in the college library until I found Spinoza, and his intellectual love of God—the God who was the underlying unity, that substratum, he called it, beneath and within all reality. And I took that for my very own and, carrying him in my intellectual baggage, went off to Cincinnati, as I took up my studies for the rabbinate. There I was taught the important principles of Reform Judaism. I learned that Judaism was a rational religion—that it encourages Jews to think for themselves and to accept only what was believable to them. I learned that Judaism addresses itself to the intellect and that its chief contribution to civilization was the concept of the one ethical monotheistic God. I learned also that Judaism was compatible with the best—the very best—of modern science and philosophy, and that the primary manifestation of devotion to this faith was an ethical life, which expresses itself in the responsibility for society and for the entire world. The crucial thing for us as students was the properly developed, reasoned idea. The crucial thing for us was to sophisticate our thinking. That was the highest expression of Judaism for us. We really didn't give much of a damn about some of the practical problems of the rabbinate. We really weren't interested in the rabbinate. We were, in my days, interested in cultivating our mind and our thought. And the school was divided into intellectual battlefields, but we were all agreed that somehow we were in the vanguard of change. We learned at college—at the Hebrew Union College—how not to take the Bible and the prayer book literally. We accepted the scientific implausibility of biblical stories of creation, of images of God, of miracles. The Bible, we learned, spoke the language and thought of its time; and we would speak in the language and thought of our time and thus be true Jews. The Bible was myth or legend, and some of it was history, and we were able to make the distinction, with the help of critical methodology, between myth and history. There was still, in that Bible, a reality worth preserving—a reality to be found there. Oh we'd choke sometimes in reading some of the passages of the prayer book in English. In Hebrew we were able to avoid their literal meaning and somehow deal with them and even respond to them. Some of us were attracted to the thinking of Mordecai Kaplan, the professor of Jewish Ethics at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, who taught us, or at least tried to teach us, that we had to do away—he said—with the supernatural idea of God, and replace it with a naturalistic idea of God . . . that we had to think of God as the sum of the forces and conditions in the universe, and in human beings, which impel us to fulfill ourselves as human beings. We argued that the primary concern in Judaism is with the way of life—a way of life involving a sense of tradition and a determination to realize certain ideals in the concrete process of our existence—to move from the historic past with these ideals, by realizing them, into a Messianic future. From

Sinai we would move to justice for the orphan and the widow and the stranger and the abolition of war and the bringing of peace and harmony. The brotherhood of man is what we called it in those days before the era of feminism. We argued that Judaism is not an accumulation of beliefs. Christianity had imposed that way of thinking about religious faith on all of Western Civilization, but Jews, primarily, had never been concerned with belief. And we quoted always from the rabbis—When we appear before the throne of judgment we will not be asked, “Have you believed in God? Have you prayed?” No, we will be asked—“Have you dealt honorably and faithfully with your fellow man?” Our religion encouraged not only this, but also the search for truth. There were no dogmas, we were taught, in Judaism. Every generation of Jewish history had produced a new vision—a new understanding—of everything, including God. So it was with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Each of their visions of God and experiences of God was different. Did Jews believe that God existed? They had no word for existence. There was no effort made, we were taught, to define God—except always under the influence of the outside culture, particularly in medieval times—Jewish philosophers wrestled with the competition of the contemporary science of their generation.

Well, such was the stuff of our reasoning. And these notions carried us along. We made our peace with the psychoanalytic criticism of religion as illusion, insisting that that Freudian concept referred not to us but to orthodox religion. That indeed was an illusion, but not the kind of religion we were talking about. We agreed with Marx, most of us, that religion was the opiate of the masses—that religion had always functioned historically, to keep the dispossessed dispossessed, by diverting them from the truth about the cause of their condition. We insisted that that, too, referred to orthodox religion—traditional religion—Jewish and Christian—but not to us. Yet we were troubled that ours was the religion serving, very clearly, the upper middle class, graced with the good manners of that class—hardly demonstrating any seriousness about their Judaism—hardly showing any passion about the realization of the prophetic ethic, about undoing the evils of our society. Yes, we were able to believe that our religious faith permitted us, encouraged us, to be modern and Jewish at the same time. Yet we were always aware that the most vibrant activities of the general culture were not religious, but secular. We often—we rabbis—often made our best friends among the atheists and the agnostics—and felt closer to them than some of the believers.

I had grasped what I thought was the central theme of Jewish thinking—To believe in oneself—to believe in the inalienable right of Jews to legislate for themselves, to define for ourselves on the basis of informed thinking, the structure and the content of Judaism—to define for ourselves the content of our Jewish life. I searched for the ways of enhancing my humanity and the humanity of my congregants and in the process of stressing this human role, I neglected the role of God. I was a Humanist. I retained some abiding faith in humanity. I retained some abiding faith in the ultimate triumph of human beings. And I confess to you that I

still do. For many people, that faith in humanity died when our people were killed at Auschwitz and Dachau and Bergen-Belsen, and the rest. That faith in humanity died in Vietnam—it died in the resistance to civil rights—it died in the exploitation of natural resources—it died in the continuing impoverishment of the poor. That faith died in the cynicism that has afflicted all of us in our culture, when we contemplated the banality of the evil perpetrated by our leaders. That faith died in the presence of the corruption which pervades even the highest of Western Civilizations. Those, as my colleague, Eugene Borowitz has said, those who put humanity in God's place found that they had frequently put a monster there. The God of triumphant modernism, he said, the God of faith in the omnipotence of education and culture and advancing scientific knowledge—that God fell for many when its arrogant ruthlessness was revealed. Many people filled this vacuum, and still do, by fleeing from society—by seeking refuge in the self, through the self. I did not join that flight, myself; but many people in this congregation did, and still do. Others fled into a new traditionalism—into orthodoxy. Others fled to a God who would tell them exactly what to do. And this became the ground in which all of the cults developed—those cults at least which demand absolute belief. It also became the ground which attracted so many again to Jewish orthodoxy. But most of the Jews we know would not choose to go that way. Oh, we would be attracted to some of the outer manifestations of tradition to yarmulkas and the like. We (as we did at Leo Baeck Temple) would invite over the Lubovitcher Hasidim to speak to us, and even into our homes. Some few in this congregation would envy the authenticity of some of these Orthodox Jews, but almost none of us were willing to accept their way of life—to accept the rigidity and the absolutism it demanded of us. In such a time as ours it becomes difficult to believe in anything. It certainly is difficult to believe in human reason. It certainly is difficult to believe in morality. It certainly is difficult to believe in people—and it certainly is difficult to believe in God.

All of the institutions we once believed in, we liberals—many of the people we believed in, betrayed us. What kind of a God would abide such a world? “If God is God,” the poet MacLeish said, in his play “Job”—“He is not good. And if God is good, He is not God.” Belief, steady belief has really not been possible for me. There were those whose faith was able to stand firm amidst all of these assaults. There were those who experienced only momentary failures of faith—only doubt. Borowitz reminds us that Leo Baeck, the great rabbi of Berlin, after whom our congregation was named, lived out the closing days of his life in Theresien, in a concentration camp.² He witnessed the destruction of European Jewry—yet he emerged from that camp without any apparent need to revise the thinking—the thought that he had developed in a number of written works in the happier times of his life. He was able to do that, in spite of the trauma which he experienced—but not so with me. I had difficulty in accepting a God of history—a God who intervenes in the affairs of nations—a God who was all-powerful. And now my effort to comprehend the meaning of human brutality, the senseless war, the cruel

waste of human potentiality—all that convinced me that either such a God was a ruthless murderer, or there was no such a God at all. There is no God who ordains that millions of Jews must die; that blacks and Chicanos and other minority groups must live in isolation—that millions upon millions of men, women, and children must be forever doomed to live in hunger, beset by disease and poverty. And if there be such a God, I dedicate my life to fighting against him. Yet, I believe in the possibility of a reality greater than myself, beyond my understanding. There are many mysteries in my world—something finer than I can imagine. There is for me, many times, a presence beyond the human presence. It is a presence that is full of awe. I surely comprehend, or dimly apprehend, that there are inner forces at work in the world, itself . . . something creative—something that exalts. I have felt it on a hilltop, by the sea, in the face of a child, in the theater, on a canvas, in the presence of music. I have felt it when I sat beside the dying. I have felt it in a moment of prayer. I have felt it when the cantor sings. I believe it is possible to communicate with whatever this presence is, although I experience that presence never constantly—but only in fragments and in moments. I come to my life and my thought and my experience, not just as a single human being—not unattached. My individuality—my singularity as a human being, is a part of a people—a historic people—Jewish people. I come to my life with a cultivated consciousness of my people's past. And I come to my life with an awareness of my connection with all human beings—and my goal—which I believe to be the goal of Jews throughout the centuries—is essentially the same as it has always been to create for myself—to create for every person, a life that will somehow sanctify the ordinary part of my existence, to help create a society in which holiness, as was imagined by those who conjured up the metaphor of God's Kingdom of Earth, in which such holiness can be realized. I experience this all as a kind of command. Leo Baeck spoke of experiencing the mystery and the commandment. The mystery of life is the awareness of being in the presence of powers and forces beyond our understanding—that fill us with a sense of humility and awe and reverence. The commandment of life is the realization that we have been given a task to fulfill—that something has been asked of us—to fulfill ourselves as Jews and as human beings. I do not know the source of this command, although my ancestors gave many names to it—Yahweh—Elohim, Adonai, Shadai, and the English language was to endow it with the name God. I do not believe in the God of whom it may be asked—“Do you believe in God?” Such a God, of whom it may be asked, “Do you believe in God?” is a mere concept—an idea. It is as humanly significant to me as asking me if I believe in the Second Law of Thermodynamics. What difference will it make in my life if I believe in God as concept or don't believe in it? What difference will I make in my life if I say—“Yes, I believe in such a God.” The experience of the nameless—of the presence—of the commanding presence of God, if you will—that will give reality to the meaning of the name, for it is in the experience that there is meaning. I believe in the possibility of an exalting

presence. I believe in an ultimate presence within me, and all of you, and all of being. And I see all of that as being in the process of becoming something that has not yet been realized in my life—or in yours—or anyone else's.

The original name for God, according to our ancient teachers, was Yahweh—the nameless name—the forbidden name. We don't know exactly how to pronounce the name, even when we dare to pronounce it. We're not even sure what it means. Yet, by its form, it suggests a simple definition—He who causes to be. He who is somehow responsible for the process of becoming. And isn't that what all of us seek? To be a part of all of the processes that are at work in the universe of our personal lives and in the lives of those about us—everywhere? The process of becoming—the process of the realization of whatever it is we were meant to be.

I have many troubles with the word God. I prefer not to use it. It embarrasses me, because it crowds in upon me with its difficulties. I suppose God, if such there be, has troubles with the likes of me. We Jews have never been at peace with God. Even our ancestor from whom our people derives its name—our ancestor, Jacob, once wrestled with God. And his name was changed to Israel . . . which became the name of our people—the name of the State of Israel. Israel means He Who Strives With God. He Who Wrestles With God. Such has been the task of the Jews—some of the best and worst Jews over the centuries. Perhaps it remains our task as well. Until we have been able to bring into being a more human way of living, not just for ourselves, but for all humanity. Until we learn what it means to be a person—to be a Jew. Until we experience the task and the commandment and embrace it for our very own, and know that this day and all that we shall be privileged with has significance and beauty. We must continue to strive with God; and in so doing, we will realize ourselves as Jews, and as persons.

This is surely not the kind of faith and certainty that congregants expect to hear from their rabbis. And many of you will be disappointed and disenchanted. I've obviously left more questions unanswered than answered. But this is a subject and an experience that we shall take up again in the many days that lie ahead.

COMMENTARY BY DAVID RINTELS

God and Leonard—now that's my idea of a fair fight, between two heavyweights. It's like Jack Dempsey and Muhammad Ali—they were at their prime in different eras, but it's interesting to speculate about. God clearly had the advantage in experience and power. He was indomitable (if you disregard the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel), and His knowledge was encyclopedic, covering the whole world, though Leonard was no slouch in this area, either . . .

. . . but for humanity, kindness, warmth and humor, for the twinkle in his eye and his love of baseball, you have to give Leonard the decision on points. History will also record that Leonard was far nicer to the Palestinians, and for a longer time. He was also devoted without reservation to his entire family, and appreciated

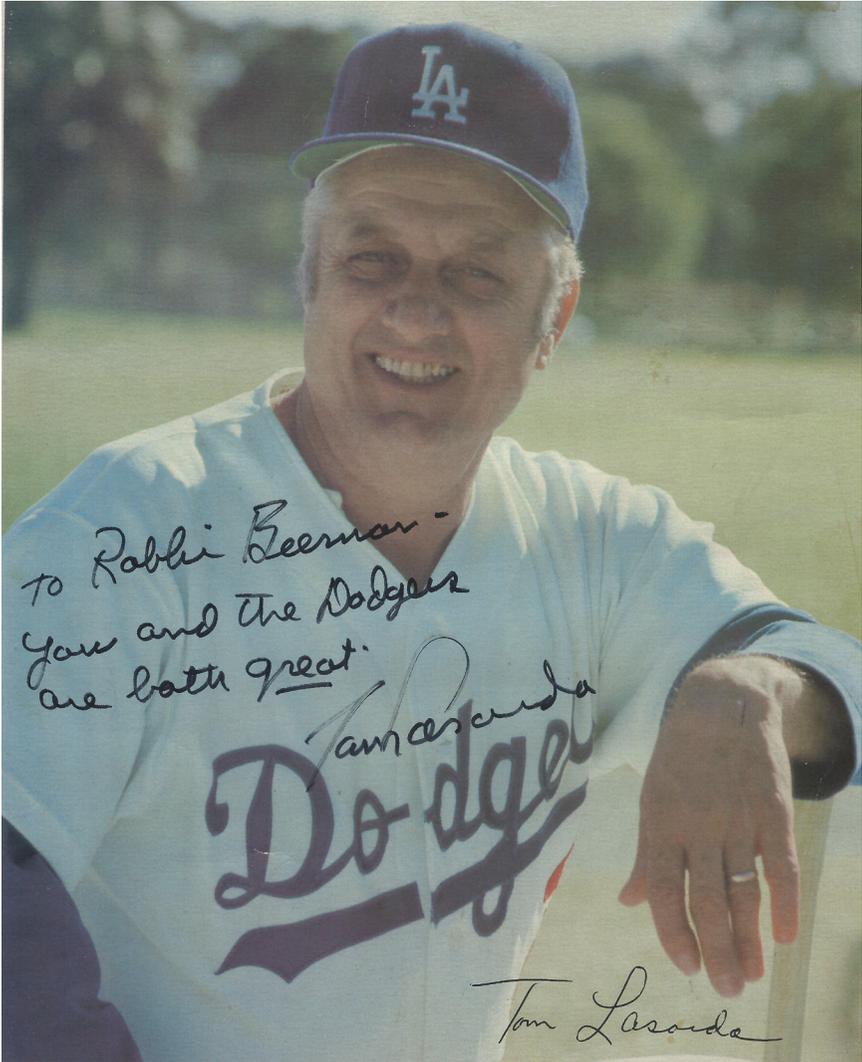


FIGURE 15. Tommy Lasorda, veteran Dodgers manager, signed photo.

that God was as well, although he did give God great credit for rebuking his own chosen people, the Israelites, when they cheered as the waters of the Red Sea swept over Pharaoh's men. Why are you celebrating?!, God demanded of them. My people are drowning.

When he was a child, Leonard spoke to God, every night. He called it praying. He got out of the habit when he grew older, but he never had a problem with people who did pray. He once said the only thing wrong with prayer was that

people who prayed were usually hoping God would tell them that two and two do not equal four.

Now, for what Leonard really did and did not think about God . . .

Signed Photo from Tommy

Editor's note: Rabbi Beerman was a lover of baseball and a longtime season-ticket holder for Los Angeles Dodgers games. Above is a picture from veteran Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda (1976–1996).