



Yom Kippur 5776: Googling for God

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“It has been a bad decade for God, at least so far.” So says Seth Stephens-Davidowitz in his recent column, “Googling for God”:

Despite the rising popularity of Pope Francis, who was elected in 2013, Google searches for churches are 15 percent lower in the first half of this decade than they were during the last half of the previous one. Searches questioning God’s existence are up. Many behaviors that he supposedly abhors have skyrocketed. Porn searches are up 83 percent. For heroin, it’s 32 percent.

How are the Ten Commandments doing? Not well. “Love thy neighbor” is the most common search with the word “neighbor” in it, but right behind at No. 2 is “neighbor porn.” The top Google search including the word “God” is “God of War,” a video game, with more than 700,000 searches per year. The No. 1 search that includes “how to” and “Walmart” is “how to steal from Walmart,” beating all questions related to coupons, price-matching or applying for a job...

Sometimes Google search data, because of Google’s status as a kind of universal question service, is perfectly suited to give us fresh insights into our offline lives. Consider this one: What questions do people have when they are questioning God?

People may not share their doubts with friends, relatives, rabbis, pastors or imams. They inevitably share them with Google. Every year, in the United States, there are hundreds of thousands of pointed questions, most of them coming from the Bible Belt. The No. 1 question in the country is “who created God?” Second is why God allows suffering. This is the famous problem of evil. If God is all powerful and all good, how could he allow suffering? The third most-asked question is why does God hate me? The fourth is why God needs so much praise.

This struck home. Here’s a quick story from Stephens family lore to explain why. At the age of 11, my father’s father asked his rabbi, “If God is so special, why



does he need so much praise?” Disappointed with the answer, he stood up, walked out of shul and never returned. Thus began a three-generation male Stephens tradition of making elaborate, over-the-top gestures, having these gestures quickly forgotten by the outside world, and proudly telling these stories over and over again at the dinner table, to eye-rolling girlfriends and wives.¹

Just what a rabbi needs to read while preparing for a High Holy Day sermon: if you give the wrong answer, they’ll never come back.

And yet, as much as we have questions about God, on Google and in real life, we appeal to our relationship in our prayers. We turn to God as ruler and parent, shepherd and friend; we ask God not to abandon us when we grow old. The passage which we are about to read this morning, from Deuteronomy, speaks of all the Israelites and the others who have joined themselves to the community, standing together and entering what is, biblically speaking, the ultimate relationship: a covenant with God.

There’s a Chasidic teaching about this passage which asks a curious question:

Why was there need for a covenant just before they entered the Land of Israel, after the covenant they had already entered into at Sinai? ...when two friends make a covenant, it is not for the present, for a time when they are very close, but for the future, because sometimes, as time passes, their feeling of closeness dissolves... Now, during Moses’ life, miracles were common, and the entire life of the Israelites in the desert was a supernatural one. The covenant at Sinai was sufficient in those circumstances. However, there was reason to fear once they entered the Land of Israel and would be subject to the laws of nature, where they would have to plow, sow and reap their fields, their love of God might be weakened, and the first covenant would be insufficient. The second covenant therefore came to ensure that the love of the Jewish people for God would continue... Even though they would have to occupy themselves with earning a living and even though there would be

¹ Seth Stephens-Davidowicz, “Googling for God,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 19, 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/20/opinion/sunday/seth-stephens-davidowicz-googling-for-god.html>



times when all would be dark and they would be tossed about throughout the world, the Jews would still maintain love of God within themselves.²

In other words: when the going gets tough, the tough stand firm.

I find this moving and problematic, all at once.

A number of years ago, there was a Modern Love column from the New York Times titled, “Those Aren’t Fighting Words, Dear,” by a woman named Laura Munson.³ Munson describes how her husband came to her after decades of marriage and said he didn’t love her anymore and wanted to leave. Her response surprised him. She said, “I don’t buy it.” And then she said:

“There are times in every relationship when the parties involved need a break. What can we do to give you the distance you need, without hurting the family?”

“Huh?” he said.

“Go trekking in Nepal. Build a yurt in the back meadow. Turn the garage studio into a man-cave. Get that drum set you’ve always wanted. Anything but hurting the children and me with a reckless move like the one you’re talking about.”

Then I repeated my line, “What can we do to give you the distance you need, without hurting the family?”

“Huh?”

Munson insists that she is no pushover. In her words, “I load 1,500-pound horses into trailers and gallop through the high country of Montana all summer.” She decided that this was his problem, not hers, and made a decision to give him space to see if he could work it out.

“And one day,” she writes,

...there he was, home from work early, mowing the lawn. A man doesn’t mow his lawn if he’s going to leave it. Not this man. Then he fixed a door that had been

² Shem Mi-Shmuel, cited in *Torah Gems*, pp.299-300.

³ Laura Munson, “Those Aren’t Fighting Words, Dear,” *The New York Times*, July 31, 2009.



broken for eight years. He made a comment about our front porch needing paint. Our front porch. He mentioned needing wood for next winter. The future. Little by little, he started talking about the future.

It was Thanksgiving dinner that sealed it. My husband bowed his head humbly and said, “I’m thankful for my family.”

He was back.

And I saw what had been missing: pride. He’d lost pride in himself. Maybe that’s what happens when our egos take a hit in midlife and we realize we’re not as young and golden anymore.

When life’s knocked us around. And our childhood myths reveal themselves to be just that. The truth feels like the biggest sucker-punch of them all: it’s not a spouse or land or a job or money that brings us happiness. Those achievements, those relationships, can enhance our happiness, yes, but happiness has to start from within... My husband had become lost in the myth. But he found his way out.

As for herself, Munson says, “I ducked. And I waited. And it worked.”

I find this moving and problematic all at once.

How do we know, in any relationship – whether with God or a human being, a friend or a sibling, a parent or a spouse – how do we know when a line has been crossed that requires us to walk away, and how do we know when the answer is to lean in and do more work? How do we know when a covenant is to be kept at all costs, and when it is broken beyond repair? How do we know when the original covenant is sufficient, and when do you rewrite the terms?

This past summer, I had a premarital meeting with a wedding couple. At one point in the conversation, the bride turned to me, and she said: “Rabbi, can I ask you something? My parents are divorced. His parents are divorced. Even you, our rabbi, are divorced. What am I supposed to think about getting married? Do you think this can succeed?”



I was so very glad that she asked. I told her what I believe: That my experience with children of divorce is that they don't get married lightly, and they approach relationships with good communication and a lot of thoughtfulness, both of which bode well. That there is a reason that in Judaism marriage is called holiness, *kiddushin*; that marriage is meant to be that place where we can be our best selves and honour our commitments to each other, and that if and when that changes, our task is to leave that covenant with as much care and integrity as we can. In other words, to quote the title of a book, divorce can be a mitzvah.⁴ I told her that just because an endeavour sometimes fails, it can still be a good endeavour – and that this is true not just of relationships, but of life. And I told her I thought they were a fabulous couple, and while life has no guarantees, there were things I saw in their relationship which gave me a lot of faith.

Last year, there was a scientific study which said that lasting relationships come down to two basic traits: generosity and kindness.⁵ Do you turn to your partner or away from them? When you fight, do you accuse or explain? The study suggests that these qualities are like muscles; if they are not exercised, they atrophy.

It's what we learn in science, and it's what we learn in shul. We stand together, side by side, and enter a covenant with God. We call forth our best qualities; we try to be our best selves. We celebrate good times; we brace ourselves for the bad. Sometimes, the relationship shifts, and the covenant changes. But as long as we use those muscles of kindness and generosity, there is still holiness to be found.

Consider God's relationship with Jonah. God asks the Jonah to go do something; Jonah runs in the opposite direction. But God doesn't let Jonah go. God follows him to the sea; God hears him from the belly of the fish. God is patient with him, even when Jonah has a tantrum; and God teaches him qualities – *chesed v'rachamim* – that could well be translated as generosity and kindness. God teaches Jonah to stay the course.

There are times when we want to walk out on God. There are times we want to walk out on each other. The hardest thing can be to know whether we should. At those times, we

⁴ Rabbi Perry Netter, *Divorce is a Mitzvah: A Practical Guide to Finding Wholeness and Holiness When Your Marriage Dies*. See also Rabbi Sanford Seltzer, *When There Is No Other Alternative: A Spiritual Guide for Jewish Couples Contemplating Divorce*.

⁵ Emily Esfahani Smith, "Science Says Lasting Relationships Come Down to 2 Basic Traits," *The Atlantic*, November 9, 2014.



can ask ourselves: does this covenant still hold? At those times, we can ask ourselves: what is the most kind and generous act?

Sophia Wolkowicz, our congregant, said something very wise to me after Rosh Hashanah. In my Rosh Hashanah sermon, I spoke about how Alice, my five year old daughter, wanted me to take an eraser to the kotel to erase any mean notes people might have left for God. In the sermon, I insisted that God could handle all our feelings, however they are expressed. But Sophia said to me, “You know, I think your daughter was right. Maybe God can handle it, but sometimes we need to take back what we said. The eraser is really for us.”

On Yom Kippur, we hold an eraser. We can try to rewrite our stories; we can do our part to reframe our relationships. We can’t take our words back, but we can find a way to say new ones. Some covenants, hopefully most, can be renewed and repaired; others must be left behind, as we enter a new year with courage and with honesty.

I began with a story of someone asking about a God who needed praise; the answer he received led him to leave his covenant with his community, and reject his covenant with that God. Rabbi Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, however, reminds us that although we Jews believe in one God, that God is known by seventy-two different names. She writes about what happen when you encourage people to find their own names for God:

One woman told me what God had become for her. “I want to name God ‘an old warm bathrobe.’” I had heard many names for God, but never that one. One year later that same woman came to see me. “I want to thank you,” she said.

“For what?” I wondered.

She responded: “For the opportunity to name God. My mother died this past year, and I took her old warm bathrobe and wrapped it around me, and I felt the presence of God.”

I do not know Your name, but I think You must wrap around us like an old warm bathrobe.



A young intelligence officer had recently returned home from a tour of duty in Iraq. He didn't talk much about the war. He was tired and glad to be home. He called me: "Do you remember when we were in class years ago and you asked me what our name for God was? I did not know then, but I know now. I want to call God, 'my trampoline.' It is what allows me to bounce back after falling down."

I do not know Your name, but I think You must feel like a young man flying.

I asked children at one Yom Kippur service what was their favorite name for God. A five-year-old boy, one of a set of triplets, stood up in the large sanctuary and said, "I want to call God, 'healer.'" His mother was dying of breast cancer. On Yom Kippur some twenty years later, I told my congregation how that story had changed me, taught me something about prayer and faith I had not known.

...I do not know Your name, but I think You must sound like that little boy praying.

Looking at a picture book with his father at bedtime, my six-year old grandson asked, "Dad, where is God?"

"Where do you think God is?" my son replied.

"I think, maybe, there She is," he answered, pointing to a picture in one of his books.

"That's God?" my son asked, surprised.

"I think, maybe," my grandson replied.

"And what do you think God's name is?" my son inquired.

Sitting on my son's lap, he said, "I think God's name is 'between.'"



“I do not know Your name,” Sasso writes, “but I think You must be somewhere between a son and his dad.” “Every time a new year beckons,” she concludes, “we search the darkest places to discover a small light, what the divine has become for us.”⁶

Our searches may start with Google. But with any luck, they don’t end there.

Let me leave you with a story. Earlier this year, a congregant asked me to help put a mezuzah on her door. Actually, she said she was going to put one up, and I offered. Now, don’t get me wrong – you don’t need a rabbi to put up a mezuzah. You actually can Google everything you need to know. But I wanted to be there for her, as a witness more than anything else. I knew that this was important. It was a home that she had made with much effort: an apartment of her own, after a divorce; a beautiful renovation, after gutting by fire, the day before she was supposed to move in; a place where she could have friends, after years of a lonely marriage. When we put up the mezuzah and said the blessing, she said something which moved me to my core. She said: “God is with me in my home.”

I do not know Your name, but I think You must be with that woman, putting up her mezuzah. I do not know Your name, but I think You must be with that couple, sheltering them under their chuppah. I do not know Your name, but I think You are even in those search engines, helping us ask our questions, wanting us to find our way.

⁶ Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, “I Do Not Know Your Name,” in *Naming God*, ed. Lawrence Hoffman, pp.197-99.