

HIDE AND SEEK

On Teaching God to Be a Better Exemplar

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Like my biblical namesake, I have had a lifelong struggle with the God of Abraham who it is reported entered a covenant relationship with my ancestors at Sinai. From time to time, God and I busy ourselves in a sporadically engrossing though all too often tedious game of “hide and seek.” For long periods of time we just ignore each other. As a liberal often skeptical rabbi, I am respectful of others’ traditions and beliefs while holding in my fashion reverence for the formulations about the nature of God that my covenanted people have affirmed down the generations. That covenant, paradoxically both unaltered yet constantly in flux, is at its root, a relationship that has not and cannot be superseded by any other. I am bound to it.

Sitting quietly one Sabbath morning in synagogue during the public reading of the Torah,¹ I found myself desultorily attending to a number of probably for good reasons, obscure Torah passages. With a start, I was aware that another “go-around” with God had begun. Disturbed by what I was hearing, I looked to the commentators who adorned the bottom half of the pages of biblical text I held in my hands. Their task now as ever, was to explain and elucidate the textual reading for the understanding of the Jews of whatever era they lived in. My attention was piqued, as I followed some “modern” commentators doing verbal cartwheels to make “difficult” texts consonant with the idea of a benign, perfect divine being, who having created the world loves all its inhabitants, while still maintaining a special,

loving covenantal relationship with the people Israel, despite their often being recalcitrant and obtuse. A relationship described retrospectively by Jeremiah with the distortion typical of a long-married disputatious couple.²

Jewish tradition, text based, takes the words of Holy writ seriously. When I read that a prominent rabbi put into print as an accurate reading of holy writ that.

the Torah speaks of God as a parent, a lover, a teacher and an intimate sharer of our hearts.³

I was shocked by the distortion. To the astute reader that is not even close to the whole truth. God is all too often anything but all-loving.

Being in serious denial about the nature of the Deity with whom we are in relationship, commentators, old and new, struggle to make God's behavior fit an all-loving procrustean bed.

I listened at another time to the obscure story of a man gathering sticks, perhaps some tinder, on the Sabbath who broke what was until then unwritten legislation.

Now when the children of Israel were in the wilderness, they found a man picking wood on the Sabbath day. They brought him near, those who found him picking wood, to Moshe and to Aha-ron, and to the entire community; they put him under guard, for it had not been clarified what should be done to him. YHWH said to Moshe: The man is to be put to death, yes, death, pelt him with stones, the entire community, outside the camp! So they brought him, the entire community, outside the camp; they pelted him with stones, so that he died, as YHWH had commanded Moshe.⁴

What got God so upset that even after a pause—time to cool the divine anger, time to consider compassion, God summarily invokes a law promulgated *after* the fact, and demands the public stoning of the unfortunate gatherer by the whole community.

The superb Torah Commentary, *Etz Hayim*,⁵ used in the congregation I founded, and now attend on Sabbath mornings, exemplifies how

even modern erudite commentators perplexed in their own words, by the “*apparent*” severity of the narrative, let the enraged God off the hook:

The wood gatherer, therefore, was not just violating one law but was destroying the dream that Israel would be a people obedient to God’s ways.⁶

That is a most interesting use of the word “*apparent*” by the modern spin-doctor. What happened was not *apparently* severe; it was cruel beyond any rationale that might mitigate God’s instruction to the people.

That *any* violation is to be extirpated by a public example being made of the “sinner” is strange for rabbinic commentators to posit and dare justify in our time.

Another Sabbath I listened to the exceedingly dire consequences for the Jew who does not observe Yom Kippur, the holiest of the High Holy days when one fasts and atones, in the prescribed manner:

Indeed if any person does not afflict himself on that same day, he is to be cut-off (*nichratah*) from his kinspeople, and if any person does any kind of work on that same day—I will cause that person to perish from amid his kinspeople!⁷

These are not the acts of a parent, a lover, a teacher, and an intimate sharer of our hearts. They are the acts of an abusing deity, sometimes loving and caring, yet all too often harsh, vindictive, unforgiving, and merciless.

Who would not be embarrassed by this God who treats as capital crimes what we would consider minor infractions. The list of those who do not fast or who do what might be considered by rabbinic tradition as “work” on Yom Kippur could easily exceed the storied “six million.” Yet God’s readiness to love does not prevent God’s dispatching with the person who does not fast. So much for a beneficent, loving, forgiving God. *Etz Hayim*, omitting comment on this petulant outburst of divine behavior, in an elegant sleight of hand refers the reader to an earlier more

benign description of what Yom Kippur is all about,⁸ which gently assures the reader about Yom Kippur:

For on this day atonement is to be effected for you, to purify you from all your sins.⁹

Etz Hayim was lucky it was available, and so close at hand.

During the High Holy days, I was again aware of my people's ongoing effort to protect and project God's public image as benign. The *Machzor*,¹⁰ the prayer book used on the High Holy days, especially on Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement—uses as a thrice-repeated mantra a truncated carefully edited version of an awesome text. Moshe wants what we all want, to know the very essence of God:

The Lord passed before him and proclaimed: The Lord, the Lord God is gracious and compassionate, patient, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, assuring love for a thousand generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression and sin,

and then adds words not said by God in the text,

*and granting pardon*¹¹

words which are not in the biblical text—possibly wishful thinking by an editor of old.

Thus far, a perfect fit with an all-benevolent, loving God who cares about us and forgives us. The editor then omits the uncomfortable:

yet He does not remit all punishment, but visits the iniquity of the parents upon children and children's children upon the third and fourth generations!¹²

That God also holds long-term grudges is simply deleted!

The “wounded” God

Agreeing with Maimonides¹³ Jewish tradition overwhelmingly asserts that God is incorporeal, can neither be touched or seen, only experienced. Biblical Hebrew records that we are created *b'tzelem*,¹⁴ modeled¹⁵ after (paradigms of) Divinity. Therefore what we share are God's incorporeal attributes evidenced in God's attitudes, thoughts and behavior. We have long assumed that “modeled after God” refers to that which is good and noble in us. Since the God we are modeled after, also has “wounded” places and acting out “neglected selves,” we must also accept that our “wounded”/“neglected” places are both present in us and in the God after whom we are modeled. Importantly and dangerously, the characteristics in us which discomfort us and which we spend endless discipline, money and therapy to eradicate, are not alien to our God.

Our texts were written, recorded, and shaped by humans. Any writer invariably projects their own thoughts and opinions onto their creation, even when borrowing word for word or piecemeal, from others. So God and our understanding of Divinity is modeled after and molded by us. It cannot be otherwise.

God and humankind, modeled after each other, both struggle with “wounded” places and symptomatic “*neglected selves*.” The God we deal with is a “wounded’ God,” very much like us, afflicted with “wounded” places and resulting “neglected selves” capable of evil as well as good. Some of God's “wounded” places have gone untended and unblest. Some have morphed and have an independent existence as divine “neglected selves.” Our relationship, with God is between two partners each of whom is “wounded,” each of whom is possessed of and sometimes possessed by “*negative selves*.”

Rabbinic tradition recognizes, with due deference, some of the “*neglected selves*” of our wounded God. God's prayer is that in the struggle between My justice and My mercy, may My mercy prevail¹⁶ God's untended “*neglected self*” at times takes center stage, vindictive and raging with retribution for old affronts dominant, as justice and mercy make a quick exit.

Facets of the Divinity in us include our “*neglected selves*,” which are uncannily similar to God's “*neglected selves*” A Godly “neglected self” is the place in the divine being God responds from in rage when the heavenly

word and wish is ignored. Likewise, our human “*neglected self*” wants things our way, is petulant and destructive, commands the unethical, is intolerant of imperfection and abusive to others.

The living God of Israel and the world is not served by making God politically correct by diminishing God’s complexity and tensions. It also infantilizes us and our already tenuous relationship with God. How we relate to our “*neglected selves*” and to God’s “*neglected selves*” is crucial to how we are in the world.

Humanity and Divinity are [Both/And] not [Either/ Or] entities;¹⁷ our foundational texts are replete with evidence of God’s “wounded” places and consequent “*neglected selves*.” We need to recognize that we may know and sponsor more fully the partner with whom we are in a loving covenant relationship. Looking at God we are simultaneously looking at and seeing humankind.¹⁸ The relationship is linked and reciprocal.

Gilligan,¹⁹ though writing about humankind, sums up what we can also say about God:

...the neglected self refers to the wounds that have not yet been integrated or “humanized”...so yes, we are all deeply “wounded,” but some of those wounds have been touched with love and sponsorship, thus becoming integrated into the overall fabric of human goodness...but some of the wounds have been ignored, denied dissociated from; and they become the “neglected self” that assumes a semi-autonomous expression of negativity.²⁰

How we got to be wounded

Had we grown up blessed with perfect parents, perfect schooling, perfect friends, and a perfect environment, we could deal with any challenge and would have no “wounded” selves. No one escapes completely. We are all “wounded” and some “wounds” untended, result in “neglected selves.”

We are carefully and regularly taught that “neglected selves” are undesirable. We struggle to control or even better eliminate them from among our “selves,” yet they tenaciously remain very much part of us, dormant at times and at others roused to feelings and behavior directed at self or other which make no sense. Outgrowths of untended

“wounded” parts of us, they often “take over,” causing much difficulty and pain.

Gilligan defines sponsorship as crucial in tending to “wounded” places. He describes sponsorship as:

the relational process by which we connect with, touch, bless, guide, provide place and proper constraints, introduce traditions and otherwise support a living presence to assume human value.²¹

In a human–divine/divine–human relationship blessing is especially crucial. Blessing is awareness of, honoring, respecting, and appreciating, *both* what is presented and what is hidden that both may be brought into “Human” and yes “Divine” Relationship. We need God’s sponsorship and blessing. And, in relationship with us, God needs our sponsorship and blessing.

One might object that we are relating to a projection all our own. Projection is unavoidable, and crucial in any relationship. When we relate to others we are relating to what and how *we* think *they* are. Because that projection may be distorted does not mean that the other is not there. Our distorted projection also does not mean that’s all they are. Evidence does intrude—with God the evidence is even more inscrutable, but it is the best we can do.

Humans do have a sense of a divine other. And we have a sense of the divine in us and in our fellow humans, whether in our tradition or another. We sense the holiness of the Dalai Lama and Mother Teresa, and in an act of kindness by a total stranger. We sense the Divinity of those who deny Divinity, and are totally outside of any religious tradition. Our experience of Divinity is a [Both/And] experience.

How we get to heal how we are

I have learned something about how people change in my two fields as well as in my personal life. No matter what one’s technical skills and training, and they are often crucial, change happens in and as an outcome of relationship. When relationship goes well, the seeming paradox is that one becomes more of who one is, not less, and space is also made

for the other to become more of who they are. When people thank me for a change in their lives, whether in my role as rabbi, psychologist or just me, my standard response is:

I couldn't have done it without you.

That is a profound truth, not a throwaway line. It is relationship that creates change. As our "wounded" places are sponsored and blessed, and our "neglected selves" are brought into a respectful relationship, recognized, and blessed by an other and/or by an internal "other," self-healing change can occur.

Pediatric theology—An impediment to being who we might be

What makes achieving healing so difficult? Each of us no matter how sophisticated was once a child who grew up with those we viscerally understood had power over us. We are programmed to recognize and appreciate the spin countless commentators and explicators of our tradition, both ancient and modern have given our text. We reverberate to their childlike way of understanding and explicating the sacred text.

Kenneth Levin writes about "The Psychology of Chronically Abused Children."

On the level of individual psychology, the paradigm is the psychology of chronically abused children...such children blame themselves for their predicament. They tell themselves, "I am treated this way because I am bad, and if I become good I will be treated better." ...the abusers tell their young victims that the abuse is punishment for their being "bad,"...such children...believe that changes in their own behavior behaving in a more exemplary fashion, being more attentive to the parents' needs and wishes—can change their parents' ways and win them a better life.²²

Michael D. Bader amplifies a factor in the child/parent world that leads to our tendency to justify God's actions.

Human beings cannot tolerate fully confronting the pathology of their parents...as children we cannot help but blame ourselves to some extent. All of us are wired to protect our parents and ourselves from a full awareness of the ways we've been hurt.²³

It is of note that in keeping with the God is always good theme that *Etz Hayim* often takes a child's perspective, making sure that we know, good children that we are, that we are responsible fully for our being abused; Commenting on Lev 26–15:

...if my laws you spurn and my regulations you repel...I will mete out to you shock, consumption, and fever, wearing out the eyes and exhausting the breath...

Etz Hayim posits:

It is the people Israel who create the *unfavorable* situation, not God, who promised not to reject His people *as long as they remain obedient*.²⁴

M. D. Faber, who offers a psychodynamic model of human development with special emphasis on the first years of life, the years during which the seeds of religious belief are sown, asserts:

...we are physiologically, genetically, normally endowed with both a capacity and a predisposition to process current information along neural pathways that harbor...our experience of being a helpless, dependent little one in the care and protection of an all-powerful parent...²⁵

When the helpless little one cries out (protoprayer) the omnipotent, caring big one (protodeity) arrives to succor and to reassure...during life's first years this happens over and over again, thousands of times, and establishes for the child through simple conditioning the essential nature of reality. Accordingly, religious faith is the adult's wishful, willful insistence (based on experience) that the attentive caregiver of the early period is till

there watching over one, that one's cry (prayer) can still beget the wished-for, loving, interventional response. . . One is not alone, and one has nothing to fear from a just and merciful God,²⁶

Elliot Dorff, a beloved teacher and friend, an elegant, refined, and revered interpreter on the Jewish scene, asserts something quite similar to what Levin and Bader describe. Although Dorff does that on a seemingly more sophisticated level, it is nonetheless a variation of the same pediatric position.

Nevertheless most of Jewish tradition teaches—and I concur with this view—that God must be construed as morally good, indeed, as the paradigm of what it means for us to be morally good.²⁷

If we accept that pediatric view of God, it follows that having been modeled after God, we humans are in essence morally good irrespective of the bad that we do.

Dorff continues:

On the other hand, when confronted with evils caused by human beings, our Jewish belief in a moral God who demands goodness requires that we do what we can to alleviate the effects of such evils and to prevent their recurrence in the future.²⁸

Our creator God, despite much evidence in our texts and our environment, that raises serious questions about God's moral goodness, is nevertheless declared by fiat to be morally good. To deal with evil, we must be good children and obey our now "acknowledged" moral God who despite sometimes irascible divine behavior demands goodness from us.

Richard Address, who heads the Department of Jewish Family Concerns of The Union for Reform Judaism, notes that "the 'pediatric' nature of much of synagogue life. . . is also reflected in theologies that still present a parent-child attitude in discussing our relationship with God."²⁹

Address notes that David Ariel looks at this challenge when he writes that

All the images that we have of God are based on our ideas of relationships. Too many of the images of the past are based on parental images of God that emphasize our dependence, inadequacy, and need for protection.

We can use a new imagery of God based on a mature understanding of relationships. We can replace the parent-child model for our relationship with God with a new model of father to adult and mother to adult.³⁰

Address reports:

What many of our older adults are now telling us is that their life experience and intellectual and spiritual maturity...requires a theology that understands the contingencies and realities of life experience, an experience that encompasses new life stages and challenges for individuals who may be living well into their ninth decade.³¹

Faber, having argued cogently for how the pediatric view of Divinity came to be, disagrees with both Address and Ariel and posits an absolute:

Although one can grow religiously, there is no growing out of the infantile stage³²

No matter how mature we are, when illness, tragedy or bad things happen, we inevitably revert to child-like thinking. We respond: "Why me?!" "I've worked at being good." "What did I do to deserve this?" "How could God do this to me?" Or we justify God. "God is good" or "It's all meant for the best." Though we may under pressure revert to that place, we need not remain there.

Old theologies may not slink silently into the night, anymore than do our childhood perceptions, yet Faber's conclusion is not inevitable nor inexorable.

That we experience God as a parent is not surprising. Parents are in an especially important position in the economy of human becoming and “being.” Their union brought us forth from “nothing.” They provided nurturance and sustained us for years. As their descendants we want their sponsorship and blessing and their love now as always. Yet as we mature, we discover that our parents like us (Surprise! Surprise!) are flawed. That does not mean that they no longer exist relationally for us.

We need to say and believe something like:

“Mom and Dad, for better or worse, I’m grown up! I acknowledge your ‘wounded’ places and ‘neglected selves.’ Some of those have been played out in my upbringing and have impacted my life. I bear your genetic and your behavioral imprint, and your experience of the world has impacted me. I am modeled in many ways by you and after you. I have my own ‘wounded’ places and ‘negative selves,’ many of which have little to do with you and with which I must deal. I love you for who you are, imperfections and all. You did the best you knew how to do. Now we are in a more equal relationship, a different way of being with each other. I am proud of you. I am proud that you are my parents. ‘I hope you are proud of me.’ I hope you can learn from me as I have learned from you.”

Relationship changes and endures with our God and our parents.

To be in a meaningful adult covenantal loving relationship with our flawed God requires full awareness of our divine partner’s “wounded” places and “neglected selves.” God’s flaws do not mean that God does not exist. It may mean that the omnipotent omni-benevolent God we have often turned to in times of trouble does not reflect an accurate reading of the reality of God. If we fail to grow out of our pediatric view of Divinity, we are stuck with a religious/relational system inadequate for our lives.

Healing God’s “wounded places”

It may seem audacious on our part as mere humans, but helping God heal God’s “wounded” places is crucial to our relationship with Divinity. Healing for both God and humankind occurs in relationship.

God’s “neglected selves” appear when God overreacts and does bad things. God’s symptomatic behavior, like ours, results from difficulties

within God's self-relations,³³ and God's relations with those over and beyond the divine self, namely us. Being created and modeled after each other, and in joint covenant, God and humankind are both tasked with helping each other deal with our own and the other's "negative selves."

What can we help God learn? How can we help God change God's behavior?

Is God teachable? And if God is teachable, what do we bring to this relationship and what do we have to teach God?

A number of traditional Jewish texts posit that God *is* indeed teachable and at times changes the divine behavior and outlook when humankind intervenes. In *Bamidbar Rabbah*³⁴ there are listed three occasions where Moses intervenes with God and God responds:

By your life!! You have spoken well! You have taught me. From now on I will. . .³⁵

It may not happen often, but it is worth a try, so I will with some residual childhood fear and trepidation suggest some of God's "wounded" untended and unblessed places and their resultant "neglected selves." What follows is a very partial list. As rabbi and psychologist, and especially as a married man, I understand full well that each of us must first attend to our own "wounded" places and "negative selves" and only then to those of our relational partner. Relationship with another, even a divine other, is no different. So with even greater fear and trepidation I will suggest some resources we humans possess which can be exemplars, assisting God in tending and healing God's own "wounded" places.

A divine "wounded" place—Being the one and only

If the Bible is the history of the relationship between God and humankind, and if God was all-knowing and all-sufficient, what makes God need humankind? What did God who never lived in a relationship even of non-equals lack that made creation of humankind a divine necessity? The price of being "one and only," a lonely isolate was clearly too much. Companionship, relating with another to ease God's pervasive isolation became a divine imperative.

God benevolently, with the best of intentions, creates a “perfect” world, which God judges as “very good.”³⁶ God awkwardly attempts to enter a covenant relationship with the very different yet somehow familiar creatures God has formed.

Yet God remains obsessed with and concerned about giving up being the one and only. God has a profoundly “wounded” place around issues of competition, rivalry, and relationship. In modern times, we might label God as egocentric or self-centered or even narcissistic. God’s introduction to divine-human relationship is as *the* One God who alone is to be recognized, and to whom a pluralistic way of thinking is anathema.

Lacking practice, God has no workable idea as to how to do “relationship.” God’s unfortunate notion of relationship is total and absolute obedience to God’s will by the relational partner. God expects God’s notion of perfection from what God has wrought. Virtually impossible to satisfy, God leaves little wiggle room. God is exquisitely sensitive about relating to and living in an imperfect relationship that does not meet God’s exacting expectations. The slightest deviation is punished severely. God throughout our texts and teachings lets us know repeatedly, and often not gently, that it is “My way or the highway.”

God’s “wounded” place around issues of rejection and perceived betrayal are highly reactive and torture God considerably. Issues of disloyalty and rejection are a persistent recurrent dominant focal point throughout scripture. They touch an exquisitely sensitive “wounded” place. The circumstances may change but the underlying theme is the same.

Unhappy with the divine creation, God irresponsibly and cruelly floods the world and virtually all life. If creation was an act of God’s love, God’s exacting obedience in a controlling way to meet God’s difficult expectations is not what we humans would consider love.

Our foundational texts are not devoid of humans who struggled with their relational partner to mitigate the effect of God’s “neglected selves.”

Abraham, though he ultimately fails in the negotiation about Sodom, provides an example of helping God deal with a divine “wounded” place, He instructs God patiently:

Heaven forbid for you to do a thing like this, to deal death to the innocent along with the guilty, that it should come about: like the innocent, like the guilty, Heaven forbid for you! The judge of all the earth—will he not do what is just?³⁷

Abraham admits that the use of such power may be God-like but is not God-appropriate. Currently obscured by the divine rage with Sodom, what God is about to do, though just and even understandable, is not right. It is a break in the relation with God's co-existing merciful "self." Abraham sponsors God's justice by placing it in relation to mercy, and not letting it stand alone as an absolute, as is the *modus operandi* of "neglected selves." Abraham sponsors by recognizing, appreciating, and blessing God's "wounded" place that pains God dreadfully when complete recognition and obedience is not forthcoming. Abraham reminds God that the name YHWH, used in this scriptural context, represents God's "merciful" self and urges God to attend to that "self" as well.

Moses after The Golden Calf points to God's obsession with being "The One and Only":

They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I commanded them, they have made themselves a molten calf, they have bowed to it, they have slaughtered-offerings to it, and they have said: This is your God, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt! So now let me be, that my anger may flare against them and I may destroy them. . .

Moses then, with superb finesse, transitions God from God's "One and Only" wounded place, to God's reputation and then ever so smoothly to God's merciful side, by reminding God of divine promises made to the less than perfect ancestors:

For what reason, O YHWH, should your anger flare against your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power, with a strong hand? For what reason should the Egyptians (be able to) say, yes, say: With evil intent he brought them out, to kill them in the mountains, to destroy them from the face of

the soil? Turn away from your flaming anger; be sorry for the evil (intended) against your people! Recall Avraham, Yitzhak and Yisrael your servants, to whom you swore by yourself when you spoke to them; I will make your seed many as the stars of the heavens, and all this land which I have promised, I will give to your seed, that they may inherit (it) for the ages! And YHWH let himself be sorry concerning the evil that he had spoken of doing to his people.³⁸

We can teach God that relationship is about respecting ourselves and others as we and they are—and as we and they might be

Although Jews strive mightily to have the words of the *Sh'ma*,³⁹ known by Jew and Gentile alike to be the watchword of Jewish belief, center of Jewish religious devotion and the last words a Jew is to say upon departing the world, *be so*, the overwhelming evidence is that God is *not* One, despite our repeated mantra and God's obsession with being "The One And Only," God is not a singular self, neither within the Godself, nor in relationship to humanity. God, we might with audacity say is a "multiple."

Richard Levy points out that God is experienced as a "multiple"

the Torah gives many other names (beside YHWH) for God, among them *Elohim* (God acting as Judge), *Adonai* (God as Compassionate One), *EI Shaddai* (God Almighty or God the Nurturer), *Shechina* (The Presence), and *Ha-Makom* (The Place). Each name helps us experience God in a different way.⁴⁰

Jack Miles in his epochal book (required reading for anyone concerned with humankind's relationship with God) writes:

Other things being equal, protracted exposure to a God in whom several personalities coexist and alongside whom no other god is ever portrayed even for the folkloric fun of it must foster a way of thinking of the self as similarly composite and similarly alone.⁴¹

The “multiple” whom we call God appears as *One* when God with our help, tends, sponsors, and blesses God’s own “wounded” places. Since we humans who are modeled after (*paradigms of*) Divinity can do intrapersonal healing, so can God, who is reciprocally modeled by us. When God’s own “neglected selves” are brought into respectful relationship healing occurs. This *intrapersonal* relationship reminds us of a loving couple *interpersonally*. Each human *intrapersonally* is a multiple. When each part nourishes and tends their inner other, sponsoring and blessing and making room for the internal other’s “wounded” places, the *inner* relationship “works,” and *one plus one equals One*, and is experienced by the observer as a *singular* unified entity. In this sense when God’s inner *self-relationship* is working, we experience God, who is plural and singular at the same time, just as we are, as *ONE*.

God enters relationship with humanity knowing next to nothing about how to do it. We on the other hand have a great deal of experience about living in relationship. We have learned how to live while not having control. We have learned to endure diversity and sometimes thrive. We experience difficulty when those we are in relationship with do not do what we want and we are positive that we need what we want. We have parents and children, spouses, and friends. We have the real-life experience from childhood onwards to marriage and beyond, of struggling day by day to live with and perhaps love the other given their perceived difference and imperfection. Respectful relationship is how we deal with the different, often alien “other.” We accept the marriage/covenant/love partner as imperfect/insecure. Yet when relationship works we experience ourselves as very much in love.

Beyond the one-on-one love relationship we have the real-life experience, which God does not have, of living in a community of unequal/equals, discovering/experiencing each others’ “wounded” places, struggling/living with and respecting a community’s “wounded” places. The recurring biblical metaphor is that we are in a covenant marriage with God. Yet that biblical metaphor is not about a covenant between equals. That would have been incomprehensible in the world in which our ancestors found themselves. Since all are modeled after God, relationship partners are by definition of ultimate worth. For us moderns, covenant partners of any sort are both different and yet equal. That is just how it is.

We would do well to teach God what we have learned and are learning about relationship. We can teach God by how we live about what it is to live in a relationship where our beloved does not live up to our expectations and sometimes even touches and exacerbates our “wounded” places.

A divine “wounded” place: God’s insecurity and low self-esteem

God demands from humanity unquestioning faith and trust.

Yet despite astonishing achievements, God shows distinct clinical signs of insecurity and low self-esteem. Is it that lack of faith in self that makes God require total control requiring humans to do God’s inexorable will and losing it if every last word is not attended to? What is God insecure about that makes God need constant reassurance as in the binding of Isaac,⁴² where God tests Abraham’s fidelity and courage, though Abraham has demonstrated a lifetime of fidelity and courage?

At another time, the Torah reader reads of those scouting the Holy Land, their report back and the people’s fear of engaging an army of “giants.”⁴³ Their fear will lead to being banished for forty years in the desert. I sit and wonder: Why does God banish the people for being who they are? Whom did God think God was redeeming from Egypt, anyhow? God had single-handedly rescued this motley band from Egypt. This was the same bunch! If God had managed to split the sea to get them out, God could manage an overland invasion to get them into their patri-mony, a “land flowing with milk and honey.”⁴⁴ Maybe God thought that the thunder and lightning show at Sinai⁴⁵ would give them courage. Unfortunately the show did not accomplish that. Why does God lose faith in God’s own abilities? God’s low self-esteem elicits an outburst against the people. Sounds familiar.

We can teach God that self-esteem does not require being perfect

We have a lot of experience and practice in dealing with and surviving our doubts, failings, and diminished self-esteem. We recurrently feel inadequate, experience doubts about our abilities and worth, hear voices in our head, often not our own, yet experienced as us, about our worthlessness and inadequacy, and how we are not nor will we ever be up to the challenges that face us. We too lack faith in ourselves. We all too often fall off the balance beam of our equilibrium.

We know that will happen again and again, it is part of who we are. We mostly get back on, and we recognize progress by shortening the time we take to get our balance back. After repeated failures we recognize that falling off is inevitable and not a comment on our worth. Getting back on is what counts. We can teach God a lot by how we live our relationship with our own fears and inadequacies and move forward with them in tow. And we can teach God, when we have learned the lesson ourselves, that one does not have to trample over others to demonstrate one's self-worth.

A divine "wounded" place: God the unforgiving holds long-term grudges

God has a well-deserved reputation for not letting go of long-term hurts and grudges. When things have not gone exactly the way God specifies, God does not forget and at times petulantly demands retribution. God endorses the utter destruction of the enemy outlined at the beginning of Deuteronomy,⁴⁶ and ends Deuteronomy not having forgiven Moses for striking the rock instead of talking to it at what became known as *The Waters of Merivah/Quarreling*.⁴⁷ God mandates that we hold a grudge in perpetuity with Amalek⁴⁸ even though despite the "spin" of both tradition and translation, it is not at all clear from a careful reading of the text whether it was Amalek or Israel who did not fear God.⁴⁹

God has a problem with forgiveness, with letting go of hurts both large and small. Although God demands repentance (in Hebrew, *T'shuvah*)⁵⁰ from humans, God eschews repentance (*T'shuvah*). God the petulant, who wants things just so, no excuses permitted, has a self-admitted reputation for being unforgiving⁵¹ unto the third and fourth generation and sometimes into perpetuity. God may know something about granting pardon, but little about repentance. To God, repentance is an oxymoron.

We can teach God that repentance (T'shuvah) is vital to relationship

We know an incredible amount about doing *T'shuvah*.⁵² We have spent endless time, effort, energy and ink, defining, teaching about, evaluating, and practicing *T'shuvah*. We know about searching for the "*nitzotzot k'dushah*,"⁵³ the "holy sparks" present in and redemptive of all creation. We practice looking for them in our "selves" and in others' "selves" and

even in God's "selves." By how we continue to do *T'shuvah* and refine it, we can teach God something vital to Godhood.

A divine "wounded" place: God's disdain for life

God destroys life with impunity, using excessive violence and cruelty to achieve divine goals. God has little appreciation of the value of life. God gives life and takes it with great abandon.

When YHWH your God brings you to the land that you are entering to possess, and dislodges great nations before you. . . you are to devote—they to destruction, yes, destruction, you are not to cut with them a covenant, you are not to show them mercy!⁵⁴

Rivon Krygier writes:

The commandments of the Torah Deut: 7:2 concerning the conquest of the land of Canaan by the Hebrews who had come out of Egypt are particularly violent and shocking to people today. Taken literally, they call for the total extermination of the native tribes of the land. . .⁵⁵

Krygier points out that God acting out by widespread extermination is not limited to others but applies to Jews as well.⁵⁶

We can teach God that relationship is for the living

We can teach God about the value of being alive. We are blessed and cursed with a constant ongoing awareness of our mortality and that with all its vicissitudes life is worth having, an evaluation which an eternal God cannot grasp. If God, as tradition teaches, is incorporeal, having no body, and consequently having nobody, God knows precious little about being embodied and all the concomitants, illness, and pain that go with that. It is imperative that we teach God about the preciousness of life, by maintaining it, healing it and lengthening it.

We could go on to some of God's other "wounded" places and "neglected selves." Some of that work we leave to others.^{57,58}

How we live, and work, study, pray, and meditate, model ourselves divinely, in areas God knows little about, can teach God, how to be in the world God has created, the same world in which we are God's partners. That interaction is at the very core of our relational experience with God. In any and all relationships, each partner can and does teach the other. The God-Human relationship is not an exception.

God is in need of relationship as much as we are. God needs a new relationship with the divine "wounded" selves, and when that is accomplished God can have a new and different relationship with us. We need a new relationship with our own "wounded" selves and when that is accomplished, we can have a new and different relationship with our fellow humans and with the God after whom we are modeled and whom we model after us.

When we pray or meditate or talk to God, we enter a relational dialog with God. And we are simultaneously praying/meditating/talking to our "selves." We take the liberty offered by our communal covenant relationship, to sponsor and bless those parts of God that sometimes get lost in the shuffle. We dare to encourage God to recognize and affirm the divine loving, caring, "self," to enter a love relationship with the divine "wounded" place(s), to bless them and so minimize the anger and rage which appear as God's "neglected selves." And we commit ourselves to our part of that task, by living as exemplars from whom God may learn about those "selves," with whom God struggles.

My Jewish roots, relationships, and training have left me with an incurable love for our scripture. In any relationship some areas remain difficult, some unclear. We all recognize that fact, whether the relationship is spousal, parents and children, children and parents, work partners, good friends or not so good friends, and even God. All relationships are never fully resolved to one's own and the other's satisfaction. Yet somehow any relationship worth having moves on.

With gratitude for the relationship as it is, and with hope for what it might yet be, I thank the God of us all, who from time to time plays hide and seek with this recalcitrant servant.

Notes

1. The Torah (The Five Books of Moses the core of worship) is read in a yearly or triennial cycle in the Synagogue. Congregants hold a book that includes the Hebrew, an English translation and commentaries.
2. Jeremiah 2: 1-2. "I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown..."
3. Wolpe, Rabbi David, in *The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles* 12/2/05.
4. Numbers 15: 32 Translation of Torah text by Everett Fox, Fox, Everett, *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996). I use this translation when I am not quoting directly from others, because in my opinion it reflects the Hebrew original more closely. An Italian saying has it correctly: "*Traduttore Traditore*" "The translator is a traitor." The only question is degree.
5. Hayim, Etz (lit; Tree of Life) *Torah and Commentary*, senior editor, David L. Lieber, literary editor Jules Harlow; sponsored by the Rabbinical Assembly and the United synagogue of Conservative Judaism 2001 New York, New York. A superb piece of work; it is used here to exemplify that even modern non-fundamentalist commentators, no matter what their formal "movement" affiliations may be, do what generations have done; i.e., justify the actions emanating from what we will call God's "negative self."
6. Hayim, Etz, p. 854 commentary on Numbers 15: 32.
7. Lev 23: 29-30.
8. You can look it up in Hayim, Etz, pp. 728, 684.
9. Lev 16: 29-34.
10. *Machzor for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur*, Ed; Rabbi Jules Harlow, The Rabbinical Assembly New York 1972.
11. Ex 34: 5 to the middle of v. 7 where the text is abruptly interrupted.
12. Ex 34: 6-10.
13. ben Maimon, Rabbi Moses: 1135-204. Arguably the greatest Jewish commentator and philosopher.
14. Hebrew of creation story. Gen 1: 26-27.
15. I have long struggled with translating "*Tzelem*." Here I use "modeled after" rather than the usual "made in the image." "Image of God" is a distorted, inaccurate, overused translation of "*Tzelem Elohim*." Originally used in the King James Bible of 1611. "Image," according to Merriam Webster's 11th Collegiate Dictionary (2003), is a "Middle English word" which means: "a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing, especially: an imitation in solid form." Or alternatively: "an exact likeness; semblance as in God created man in His image."

In modern usage "image" has much more of a visual sense. It does not mean what *Tzelem* meant, then or now. An Italian saying has it correctly: "*Traduttore Traditore*" "The translator is a traitor." "Image," though well intentioned, is nonetheless a distortion of Jewish biblical underpinnings. It is simplistic and does not deal with the reality of how we are as human beings, how we are with those "independently" existing "parts" of us that seem clearly not "in the image." Although a commonly accepted truism, it leads to a grossly inadequate distorted description of our God and God's creation. The "Jewish" understanding of God's incorporeality is betrayed by a mistranslation of our own Hebrew text.

- Christians have an image, God's son. If Jesus is God's son, he is an image of God. For Jews whose tradition has maintained against all odds, the incorporeality of God (Deut 4: 15-19) "image" is an erroneous and misleading inadequate distortion. The best usage is the original Hebrew though its overtones are not fully accessible to the non-Hebrew speaker. For further explication see *Jewish Relational Care A-Z; We Are Our Other's Keeper, A Guide for the Reader*, Chapter 1. Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 2006. For a fuller explication of the author's [Tzelem N'shamah] model of "Human Beingness"; see *The ABC's of Jewish Relational Care*, p. 5 and *Key Premises of Jewish Relational Care*, p. 7.
16. God's prayer; "May it be My will that my compassion overcome My anger and may My mercy prevail over My attributes [of justice and judgment]. May I deal with my children in accordance with My attribute of compassion. May I act towards them beyond the letter of the law." Babylonian Talmud (*B'rachot*) 7 A.
 17. *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar, By the Power Vested in Me*, The Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 2002, Chapter 7.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
 19. Gilligan, S., *The Courage to Love*; W. W. Norton & Company, New York, 1997.
 20. Gilligan, S., *Personal Correspondence*.
 21. *The Rabbi as Symbolic Exemplar, By the Power Vested in Me*, The Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY, 2002, pp 164-5.
 22. Levin, Kenneth, clinical instructor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and a Princeton-trained historian. He is the author of *The Oslo Syndrome: Delusions of a People under Siege*, Smith & Kraus, Hanover, NH, 2005.
 23. Bader, Michael D., *Tikkun Vol. 2V, No.5 The Perils and Possibilities of Teshuvah*, p. 13.
 24. Hayim, Etz, commentary, p. 749.
 25. *The Psychological Roots of Religious Belief; Searching for Angels and the Parent-God*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2004, p. 17.
 26. *Ibid.*, p. 17, 20, and 24.
 27. Dorff, Elliot N., *Matters of Life and Death; A Jewish Approach to Modern Medical Ethics Appendix*, p. 398.
 28. *Ibid.*, p. 399.
 29. *Jewish Relational Care with the Healthy Aging in Jewish Relational Care A-Z, We Are Our Other's Keeper*, Ed. Jack H Bloom, Haworth Jewish Practices Press, Binghamton, NY, 2006, pp. 277-88.
 30. Ariel, David, *Spiritual Judaism* (New York, Hyperion, 1998), p. 3.
 31. Address *ibid.*, p. 279.
 32. Faber *ibid.*, p. 42.
 33. Gilligan, S., *The Courage to Love*.
 34. A religious text holy to classical Judaism, comprising a collection of ancient rabbinical homiletic interpretations of the Hebrew Bible.
 35. From *Midrash Rabbah-BaMidbar Rabbah*, part 2, p. 244, Ch. 33. Parashah 19 on Parshat Hukat Moshe in *Expositions on the weekly Torah Reading*, Aryeh Mirkin, Ed. (Yavneh Publishing House, Tel Aviv, 1965).
 36. An evaluation offered repeatedly by God in Genesis, Ch 1.
 37. Gen 18: 25. Translation of Torah text by Everett Fox.

38. Ex 32: 8-15. Translation, *ibid*.
39. Deut 6: 5. "Hearken, O Israel; YHWH our God YHWH (is)." One Translation of Torah text by Everett Fox, Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (Schocken Books, New York, 1996).
40. *Reform Judaism*, Summer 2006, Vol. 34, No. 4, p. 59.
41. Miles, Jack, *God: A Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995.
42. In Hebrew the *Akedah* the binding of Isaac, Gen 22: 1 ff.
43. Numbers Ch. 13-14.
44. *Ibid*.
45. Ex 20: 15.
46. Deut 2: 34-35. We conquered all his towns at that time, we devoted-to-destruction every town: menfolk, women, and little-ones; we left no remnant. Translation, Fox, *ibid*.
47. The incident recorded in Numbers 20: 1-13. The punishment in Deut 32: 51. Translation, Fox, *ibid*.
48. Deut 25: 17-19.
49. See author's *Jewish Relational Thinking and a Difficult Text, Amalek and Us*, in *Jewish Relational Care A-Z; We Are Our Other's Keeper* Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY 2006, pp. 269-75.
50. *T'shuvah* derives from the root. S-Hu-V. Its meanings are (1) An answer to a question or claim; (2) Turning back to one's origins; (3) Cycle of time; (4) Borrowed usage; return to the good way; regret; abandoning sin. . .
51. Ex 34: 1-10.
52. See *Jewish Relational Care A-Z, We Are Our Other's Keeper* Ch. 24: *Relational Care For Those Who Have Sinned: T'shuvah In Sexual Violations With Direct Implications For Other Situations*. pp. 241-68.
Or author's *T'shuvah for Our Time; When Sexual Violations Have Taken Place: CCAR Journal*, Fall 2005 pp. 35-67.
53. Kook, Abraham Isaac, *The Lights of Penitence, Lights of Holiness, The Moral Principles: Essays, Letters and Poems*. Translation (and with introduction by) Ben Zion Bokser in series: "The Classics of Western Spirituality" (Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, 1978).
54. Deut 7: 1-4. Translation of Torah text by Everett Fox.
55. *Did God Command the Extermination of the Canaanites? The Rabbis Encounter with Genocide*, *Conservative Judaism* Vol; 57 #2 Winter 2005, pp. 78-94.
56. *Ibid*., p. 79.
57. Blumenthal, David R, *Facing the Abusing God*; Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993, pp 154-55.
58. Steinfels, Peter, *New York Times* September 8 and 10, 2005. He writes about God—the notoriously volatile irresponsible creator, with a long-time reputation for not modulating the natural forces he is credited with creating.