

It was in June 2003 and President George Bush was meeting with the Palestinian Prime Minister, Abu Mazen and Foreign Minister, Nabil Shaath about the progress of the peace process and the status of the region. If you believe the account of these interactions from a BBC news series, this encounter went beyond your normal diplomacy. According to the account of these Palestinian ministers President Bush said to all of us: 'I'm driven with a mission from God. God would tell me, "George, go and fight those terrorists in Afghanistan." And I did, and then God would tell me, "George, go and end the tyranny in Iraq ..." And I did. And now, again, I feel God's words coming to me, "Go get the Palestinians their state and get the Israelis their security, and get peace in the Middle East. And by God I'm gonna do it."

Oh my God.

Meanwhile, just down I-25 Dr. James Dobson seems to have just a little bit too much to do with the selection of our country's next Supreme Court justice. It would appear that not only did Karl Rove choose to consult with Dobson before the nomination was announced, but Dobson has taken it upon himself to monitor the selection process on behalf of the right wing. He has, after all told God, "If this is not the person you want on that Supreme Court, all you have to do is tell me so, and do it through any means you want to." I assume that once Dr. Dobson gets the divine message, that he will do something about it.

Oh, my God.

Yet even closer still, some six weeks ago, a group of Denver Jews gathered on the steps of the Capital to rally against the removal of Jewish settlements from the Gaza strip. These Jews in Denver rallied their support for those Jews who despite the fuzzy legality of their settlements, decided to live on that land because, "God promised it to the Jews and not to the Palestinians." In fact, many of these settlers felt so clearly that God wanted them to live on this land that a prominent rabbi in Israel had rented out Jerusalem's largest hall for Sunday, August 21, for the celebration to thank God for the miracle he was sure would come. (to save the settlers and their homes). Indeed, as the nation counted down to the scheduled date of the disengagement, many Gush Katif residents refused to pack their belongings or make any plans for the day after.

Oh, my God.

Everywhere we turn there seem to be many people and many groups in our world who claim to know rather well what it is that God wants us to do and how to act. Most do so in the name of a fundamental religion - whether that religion is Christianity, Islam or even Judaism. As liberal Jews these statements and even the language of God used to make them is burdensome and uncomfortable. For it is not necessarily a way that we would talk about or think about God. Many of us are liberal Jews because we do not believe that God talks or communicates in this manner or such things. And yet, on a national, social and even Jewish communal level we find ourselves in a quagmire of God soaked language and claims. We are up to our collective knees in this fundamental way of thinking about God and we just do not know how to find our way out of it.

In fact I think we often find ourselves caught up and even intimidated by such talk and those who talk this talk. This influence of fundamentalists (or intimidation if you would like to call it such) is the reason that fundamentalism is so powerful. How many of us know how to really engage in a conversation with someone of a fundamental way of thinking who professes the need to convince us of their faith? How many of us find ourselves a bit intimidated when meeting or interacting with a very observant looking Jew, who appears to know more and do more than we do?

I have a friend with a few kids. My friend is an incredible person. She is a liberal thinker and one of the most competent, modern and progressive individuals I know. She is a model of gender equality in her life and her relationships. When she chose to send her children to the Luvabovitch pre-school in her city, I was a bit surprised - knowing what I know about her. I asked about how she felt about the gender roles that her kids may be learning in this educational setting. Sheepishly, she explained to me, that this school was a great program and well, she was trying not to think about it because the rest of the program was so great.

What happens to us non-fundamentalists when we try to engage with people or institutions with a fundamental approach to the world? I serve on the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice and often discussions at these meeting focus on a mixture of frustration and respect the way that the fundamentalists on the side of those who oppose abortion and have mastered and directed the social discussion on the issue of abortion. Look simply at way that abortion opponents name themselves, they are pro-life. Even the name, 'pro-life' puts non-fundamentalists on the defensive.

When it comes down to it ... no one, not James Dobson, not President Bush, not Orthodox Jews, no one has any more claim to know or understand what it is that God wants more than we do. And we as a liberal thinking community have to start acting like it. God is no more in a black and white understanding of the universe than in a grey understanding of how things work.

The Torah portion we read this morning reminds us so clearly of our place at the table. Not only does the portion say, 'Atem Netzvaim - All of you stand here this day', but it goes on to list who is included at the table. The Torah tells us the 'all' includes men, women, children, strangers, the woodcutter and the water drawer and even those who were not physically present. The Torah screams with this luxurious parade of nouns, that no one is excluded from standing before God ... and in turn trying to interpret exactly what God wants.

The very first word of the 10 commandments is the letter Aleph. The Aleph makes the following sound ... it is silent. In a beautiful midrash, we are taught about exactly what happened at the moment that the people encountered the divine presence. That all God spoke in that moment, was the letter Aleph ... and that everything afterwards was someone's interpretation of that and what followed. When we hear from Dr. Dobson or the former Gaza settlers tell us what God wants, they are telling what they hear after the Aleph. It could be right, it could be wrong -- it is an interpretation, a biased understanding. They choose to understand it in a very concrete and theistic manner - which they are entitled to do. Yet, it is still what follows the Aleph and their interpretation.

The amazing thing and the challenging thing, too ... is that Aleph is still hanging out there to interpret and understand and to teach and model our lives after. The amazing thing and the challenging thing is that us liberal Jews have as much authority, authenticity and right to decipher what it means when God chooses to speak the letter Aleph and say

What I speak of is difficult for a few reasons ... It is certain difficult to argue, disagree or even compromise with someone who approaches the world with a fundamental approach about God. In this approach there can be no doubt, no grey area and consideration when it comes to what God wants ... It is also difficult because it is human nature to want a more black and white, cut and dry explanation of things ... I think that what makes it most difficult for us, or I should speak for myself, is that I do not think about God or talk about God in this manner. I cannot say with much integrity or sincerity that I think that God wants the Jews to have certain piece of land; or that God want a certain lawyer

sitting on the Supreme Court or that God wants one country to invade and occupy another country. I think we need to start here - in finding a way to get our heads around the idea that we know what God wants as much as they do. God, divinity ... however we choose to call it, does not belong only to those who speak with the fundamentalist tongue ... we are standing here, too.

There was a great debate, at a certain time, as to which great rabbi understood the teachings of tradition. There were three of them - R. Abraham, R. Isaac and R. Jacob. Each of their communities believed that their rabbi, their teacher was the wisest, most profound and most engaging of any rabbi who lived. The residents of each community bragged to the other that their rabbi understood the Mitzvot - what God commanded of humanity - better than the other and could easily command the attention of any group at any time and engage them and inspire them. So, a little to the rabbis reluctance a contest was arranged. The three communities would hold a banquet; each rabbi would have the chance to speak to the attendees with his best piece of Torah and presentation. After the meal, they would decide which of them and their presentation hold the group's attention the best, and that rabbi would be considered the most wise and have the best understanding of God's Mitzvot. The banquet arrived and the presentations began - each rabbi was brilliant and masterful, explaining their interpretation of God's Mitzvot to the assembled crowd. When each rabbi spoke, the people gathered listened with rapt attention - yet there were always a few people listening - who did not find this rabbi or that rabbi so interesting. So, while they were respectful, they still fidgeted, talked with their neighbor and did not remain completely silent. After the completion of the presentations, the assembled throng of people waited for the banquet to be served. They waited and waited and waited. The crowd became hungrier and grew restless, to the point of riot. Then before the crowd became unruly, the headwaiter finally stood and announced, 'The meal is served.' At that moment, every eye and every ear paid attention to the headwaiter -- there was complete silence. The rabbis watched all of this and decided then and there, that this headwaiter was as wise as they and knew as much as God's Mitzvot as they did - for he was able to capture the complete attention of the people assembled.

No religion, no denomination, no particular movement has the monopoly on God, divinity or religious truth. Supporting or opposing the war both may be rooted in religious and spiritual truths. Supporting a woman's right to abort a pregnancy and opposing that right both may be rooted in religious and spiritual truths. Supporting or opposing a gay couple's right to marry both may be rooted in religious and spiritual truths. Supporting or opposing the idea that God wants a certain people to inhabit and control the land of Israel both may be rooted in religious and spiritual truths. No matter the issue or the group, may we remember, that God speaks to us, in our hearts; that we hear as clearly as any; and that we must share our perspective, interpretation and vision of God's voice with the world.