RABBI'S MESSAGE

Playing God, Calling God

At times, when people act as if they have total control over a situation, they can be accused of "playing God." In the movie industry, actors have also had that role. Morgan Freeman played God in *Bruce Almighty,* quite elegantly, wearing a white suit and speaking with his beautiful, resonant voice. He even reprised the role in *Evan Almighty*, hinting for younger generations a consistent image. Val Kilmer played the voice of God from the burning bush in the animated *Prince of Egypt*. He was also Moses' voice, which fits with a *midrash* that says God sounded like Moses to make Himself feel comforting and familiar to Moses. Charleton Heston did the same thing, playing both Moses and the voice of God in the epic *Ten Commandments* movie. And even comedians Whoopie Goldberg and Rodney Dangerfield tried out the roles in lesser-known movies.

My favorite portrayal is George Burns, whose character in *Oh God*, was so popular he reprised it in two sequels, *Oh God, Book II* and *Oh God, You Devil*. In the original, God's character appears as an old man in casual clothes and a fishing hat to a grocery store clerk played by John Denver. He instructs him to become a modern-day prophet and get people to change their ways. I remember seeing it as a teenager, and sensing the whole theater around me had people glued to their seats, eager to hear messages from this fictional God.

In these imaginative movies, God calls upon people to help Him. According to Biblical teachings, God approaches multiple characters. He tells Noah to build an ark, Abraham to leave his father's house (and also to sacrifice his son, Isaac), speaks to Moses from a burning bush, offers King Solomon the gifts of wealth and wisdom, instructs Jonah to warn the people of Nineveh, and numerous other examples. In prayer, communication seems to be only one way. One of our common blessings is to praise God, is *shomayah t'fillah* – "who hears our prayer." We assume we are being heard.

And how do we know we are addressing the Deity correctly? At the beginning of the Torah, God is referred to as *Elohim*. By the second chapter of Genesis, we are introduced to four letter which are knows as the tetragrammaton: yud – hay – vav – hay י - ה- ו- ה We generally don't pronounce these letters, regarded as God's sacred, unpronounceable name. Some have used "Yahweh" or "Yehovah" as attempts to pronounce it, but in Hebrew prayer and teaching, we substitute "Adonai," or "my LORD." Elsewhere, we learn of different names – Sha-dai (the Almighty), Ribbonno Ha-Olam (Master of the World), Ha-Shem (the Name), Shekhinah (Divine Presence), and several others. But our most sacred teaching, the Shema emphasizes One God.

One God with many names and many attributes. The Merciful One, the Omnipotent, the All Knowing, All Powerful, etc. In Shema, we have two names together, like in most blessings: Adonai Eloheinu – usually translated as The LORD our GOD. The ancient rabbis taught that Adonai was the God of mercy, compassion and love. Eloheinu represented justice, law and

accountability. According to Midrash Rabbah, in creating the world, God said, "*If I create the world with (only) the attribute of mercy, sin will be plentiful; and if I create it with (only) the attribute of justice, how can the world exist? Therefore, I will create it with both attributes, mercy and justice, and thus may it endure*." And we bring those attributes together on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when we pray to Avinu Malkeinu – the Parent and the Ruler.

Many people choose not to spell out the name of God out of respect, using G-D or some variation. This is mindful, but, in my opinion, not necessary. The four-letter tetragrammaton YUD-HAY-VAV-HAY in the Torah and prayerbooks utilizes the same letters as the verb "to be." So, in many ways, it could also be translated as "Being;" which can be a noun OR a verb. Rabbi Ed Feinstein of California uses the verb "Godding" to teach that mitzvahs, sacred actions, are our attempts to be God-like. So, what's the best name to use in prayer? God only knows! I like to think that however we call upon the Almighty, the Holy One or any other name, God knows what we mean.

I return to the movie with George Burns. At the end of the movie, when he (or He) exits, the grocery clerk is sad to see him go. He asks, "What if I want to talk to you?" And the old man says, "I'll make you a deal. You talk. I'll listen."

Baruch Atah Adonai, Shomayah T'fillah – Blessed are You, God, who hears our prayer.

Keep on Godding!

L'shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon