

From the Rabbi's Desk @ Hillcrest Jewish Center

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Devar Torah for Kol Nidrei

What Kind of God Do You Have?

5777



My friend and colleague, Rabbi David Wise, has a tradition of recalling each Yom Kippur the names of a few personalities from the political arena, sports, and arts who passed away during the last year. And indeed, this past year we lost, among others, Nobel Prize laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, boxing legend Muhammad Ali, music legends Prince and David Bowie, and most recently Shimon Peres, former Prime Minister and President of the State of Israel.

One of the people who also passed away this past year and did not make it to the category of legend was Jerome Silberman, best known as Gene Wilder.

You probably remember Gene Wilder as Willy Wonka, in *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, or as Dr. Frederick Frankenstein in *Young Frankenstein*, or as Leo Bloom in *The Producers*.

For me, however, Gene Wilder will forever be associated with Rabbi Avram Belinski in *The Frisco Kid*.

"The Frisco Kid is a 1979 Western comedy featuring Wilder as Avram Belinski, a Polish rabbi who is traveling to San Francisco, and Harrison Ford as a bank robber who befriends him."

In the film Rabbi Avram Belinski arrives in Philadelphia from Poland on the road to San Francisco where he will be a congregation's new rabbi. Belinski, an innocent, trusting, and inexperienced traveler, falls in with three con men, who trick him into helping pay for a wagon and supplies to go west, then brutally rob him and leave him and most of his belongings scattered along a deserted road in Pennsylvania.

Still determined to make it to San Francisco, Belinski spends time with some Pennsylvania Dutch (whom at first he takes for Jews) who nurse him back to health and give him money for the train west to the end of the line. When he reaches the end of the line in Ohio, the rabbi manages to find work on the railroad. On his way west again after saving up enough money to buy a horse and some supplies, he is befriended and looked after by a stranger named Tommy Lillard (Harrison Ford), a bank robber with a soft heart who is moved by Belinski's helplessness and frank personality. While traveling together, the two experience American Indian customs and hospitality, disrupt a Trappist monastery's vow of silence with an innocent gesture of gratitude, and learn a little about each other's culture."¹

Since I assume many of you haven't watched the movie, I won't spoil it for you, although it is very sad at the end when they die. Just kidding.

Now seriously, if you haven't seen the movie, let me suggest that you do. It is not only one of the funniest movies I have ever seen, but it also has an overall inspiring message, on the value of honesty, innocence, loyalty, and devotion.

One of the highlights of the movie is a priceless one-minute dialogue between Rabbi Avram Belinski and Indian Chief Gray Cloud.²

The dialogue, a simple masterwork of theological conversation, goes like this:

Avram: Wonderful! Wonderful and nice dancing.

Chief Gray Cloud: Nice does not make rain. Yes or no, can your God make rain?

Avram: Yes.

Chief Gray Cloud: But he doesn't?

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gene_Wilder

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tDH3vDLDyIM>

Avram: That's right.

Chief Gray Cloud: Why?

Avram: Because that's not his department!

Chief Gray Cloud: But if he wanted to, he could?

Avram: Yes!

Chief Gray Cloud: What kind of God do you have?

Avram: Don't say my God. He's your God too.

Chief Gray Cloud: Don't give him to us. We have enough troubles with our gods.

Avram: But there's only one God.

Chief Gray Cloud: [in reference to Avram's god] What does he do?

Avram: He... He can do anything!

Chief Gray Cloud: Then why can't he make rain?

Avram: Because he doesn't make rain. He gives us strength when we're suffering. He gives us compassion when all that we feel is hatred. He gives us courage when we're searching around blindly like little mice in the darkness... but He does not make rain!

[Thunder and lightning begin, followed by a downpour]

Avram: Of course... sometimes, just like that, he'll change His mind.

Now, imagining that the dialogue between Rabbi Avram Belinski and Indian Chief Gray Cloud is indeed theological, please allow me to share with you a few lessons we can derive from it.

First, Chief Gray Cloud asserts: *"Nice does not make rain."* There is a fundamental difference between nice and good. Not everything that is nice is good, helpful, useful, or meaningful.

To the central question of this dialogue: "What kind of God do you have?," Rabbi Belinski replies: "Don't say my God. He's your God too." Rabbi Belinski is teaching Chief Gray Cloud and all of us a profound lesson: grasping the essence of God is a difficult task, but you cannot even begin addressing it unless you make yourself part of the question. Like the wicked son in the Haggadah, when you leave yourself out of the question, the answer will elude you. "He's your God too." This is how we begin any approach to Jewish theology. When God introduces Himself to the Children of Israel he declares: "I am Hashem your God." You and I are connected. I am yours and you are Mine.

Rabbi Belinsky seems to be telling Chief Gray Cloud: you wish to understand what kind of god we have? You need to own "so to speak" God!

To the central theological question: If your God is so powerful, then why can't He make rain?" Rabbi Belinski replies with one of the most beautiful statements about God's nature: *"He gives us strength when we're suffering. He gives us compassion when all that we feel is hatred. He gives us courage when we're searching around blindly like little mice in the darkness."* In other words, you might not be able to find a satisfactory answer from God as to why you are suffering, and yet you will be able to find strength, comfort and assurance in God's presence.

Finally, Rabbi Belinski admits that the same God who can make rain but doesn't make rain, sometimes will make rain. Just like that! The thundering God not only surprises Chief Gray Cloud but He surprises Rabbi Belinski as well. Rabbi Belinski seems to be telling Chief Gray Cloud, and again, all of us, that in order for us to be in a relationship with God, we must allow ourselves to be surprised.

What kind of God do you have?

Rabbi Belinski's answer can be summed up as follows: God is first and foremost a personal God. He is my God, not just God. Although God can do whatever He wishes, He does not always do whatever we wish He will do. God gives us strength when we suffer, and teaches us compassion when all that we feel is hatred. Again, our relationship with God is one in which we must let ourselves be surprised.

Overall, God is real. The real deal. He has the power to speak to us and we have the power to speak to Him.

Sixty-three years ago, Abraham Joshua Heschel was asked to address the Conservative rabbis at the 53rd Rabbinical Assembly convention in Atlantic City. The topic was: *The Spirit of Jewish Prayer*. For Heschel the first step to infuse spirit into Jewish prayer was to bring God back to Jewish prayer. His words over sixty years ago are more relevant today than ever:

"Gentlemen, we worry a great deal about the problem of church and state, synagogue and state. Now what about the synagogue and God? If God does not have the power to speak to us, how should we possess the power to speak to Him? There is something which is far greater than my desire to pray, namely, God's desire that I pray. If God is a what, a power, the sum total of values, how could we pray to it? Unless, therefore, God is at least as real as my own self; unless I am sure that God has at least as much life as I do, how could I pray?"³

Yes, synagogues are about the survival of the Jewish people, the centrality of Israel, cultural and educational programs, mitzvah projects, Torah classes, social events, youth and family activities, family dinners, creating and sustaining friendships, and much more, and our vibrant and thriving shul is not the exception.

Sixty-three years ago Heschel was addressing successful Conservative rabbis serving in successful Conservative congregations. Membership was then growing exponentially, the intermarriage rate was low, Hebrew Schools and preschools had

³ Heschel, Abraham Joshua: *The Spirit of Jewish Prayer*. In: *Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly of America*. Volume XVII. June 1953.

waiting lists, and the Community Center model of a “shul with a pool” was thriving all over United States, including at the Hillcrest Jewish Center of Rabbi Mowshowitz.

I should like to suggest that we were so busy enjoying our success, that God was knocking at the door and we couldn’t hear Him.

It is time to bring God back, both to our personal lives and to our shul’s life. As we begin a journey together into the holiest day of the year, let’s invite God to travel with us.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern of Kotzk, (1787 - 1859) more commonly referred to as the Kotzker Rebbe once asked his students: “Where is God?” The students, surprised by the question, rushed to answer: “Isn’t the entire universe filled with His glory?” to which the Kotzker Rebbe replied: “God is only where you let Him in.”

Paraphrasing Chief Gray Cloud’s question: What kind of God do we have?

Let me give you a simple answer: We have a God who wants to be part of our lives.

Ribono Shel Olam – Master of the Universe – bless us with the awareness of Your presence in our lives. “For we are Your children and You are our Father; You are our God, and we are Your people.” You *give us strength when we’re suffering and compassion when all that we feel is hatred. Please give us the wisdom to search for You, to bring You back into our lives.*

In this sacred hour we ask You one more time to bless us with a year of joy and health, peace and fulfillment, with a good and sweet year.

Amen.