

My Rock & My Redeemer

It is with both excitement and confusion that I attempt an explanation of my personal theology by uncovering the complex soul found within a very simplistic faith. I will sum up as concisely as I can, since this is a subject that I can write and speak about for days.

I was raised in a large family where, by nature there was a mix of personalities and beliefs. My mother taught that "Gd knows and sees everything", which may have been used as a scare tactic to get us to behave, but I also think she believes it. She would always conclude issues of conflict with "well, only G-d knows" or "Gd knows the truth, it's ok" and that would wrap up the conversation. I had a *Zeide* (grandfather) that would exclaim, "Thank GOD I'm an Atheist!" He was that person that a lot of us are probably familiar with - who claimed no faith in G-d but was more Jewish than anyone I knew. Our family has always been very proud of being Jewish. Then there was an uncle of mine, who would gaze out at the weeping willows swaying in the breeze or watch nature of some kind and say, "Look at that, how can anyone deny G-d's existence?" On the other hand, I would hear my father say "How CAN there be a Gd when these things happen?"; while watching a *60 Minutes* episode of children born with horrible diseases with unexplainable causes. So it is safe to say that in my youth, theology was not a very concrete idea. G-d was confusing but definitely around.

Perhaps I am a product of such complexity but nonetheless, I have grown into a pretty complex woman. Complex in emotion, faith, lifestyle, religious practice, haircut...it's actually pretty complicated so let's address my practice so I don't digress!

I will always say that I am a traditionalist at heart, with a liberal mindset. I am religious without the need for it in my government. I will say that I keep Kosher and will ALSO tell you that there is nothing like my Dad's ham and cheese omelet on a Sunday morning. I find inspiration with the Orthodox community on *Shabbos* afternoons but feel like I am home at *Kabbalat Shabbat* with live music and singing alongside women with pants on their legs and *kippot* on their heads. I am a feminist who loves wearing dresses. A believer in egalitarian societies who happens to embrace all things feminine and prefers a scarf on HER own head instead of a *kippah*, it's cuter. I have fasted and prayed intensely during Yom Kippur only to break the fast with a shot of tequila and a tattoo, true story. It's just who I am. As confusing as I may sound, I am finally finding peace and love in my own complexity, even if others don't. I am shy a lot because I always want to be respectful, but I accept myself for who I am.

Now, there are two things I can say are NOT complex about me, that there has never been any doubt about; those things are my being in love with all things Jewish and my faith in Hashem. I believe that Gd does not judge my complexity or me. I was taught that Gd just wants you to try; that you should do the best you can to be good. In

Judaism, I was taught the same thing, you don't go to hell for messing up, you just learn and try to do better next time. These simple concepts have stayed with me my whole life probably because it's comforting.

As I began to grow and live my own life, I would reflect and see that G-d had always been with me. I felt there was a reason I went through things, even in trying times; that the lessons helped me grow and shape me, and that THAT very concept was G-d to me.

Now, It might be true that when I got to California and hung around lots of "New Agers", I might've called it "*The Universe*" like everyone else did - but the point remains that I believed I was a part of something, that we are all connected somehow in a way that is unexplainable and for which I don't have time to try and analyze, because my faith stems from a feeling. I simply could not imagine that no one listens to my thoughts. In a world where this social butterfly constantly finds herself spiritually alone, there is peace in having G-d as a companion. I feel that *something* is with me and listening, someone understands all my jumbled up feelings that I can't always explain. *He knows how I felt through that, right?* Thus, I have been able to face life with some confidence that we'll be all right, that you and I will see the light we need see. And so eventually my thoughts turned into prayers, and my prayers turned into some pretty amusing conversations with G-d on a regular basis.

I pray in the morning when I get up. I use meditation and movement to create a *kavanah* focused on gratitude. We've all read or heard that gratitude is good for the soul, I'm sure. So I focus on things I am grateful for and recite some morning prayers and blessings. Again, there is peace and comfort in feeling that someone is listening, that I don't just tell myself I'm grateful, but I share it with that powerful presence, with *Adonai*. I start the day with a peaceful intent and have actually started to notice that I might be a little grumpy on days I haven't engaged in my little routine, so that's something to think about. Now do I think G-d somehow physically "comes down" and literally places the breath in my mouth that I am thanking him for? I don't know. Is it a metaphor? I don't know. I only know that I am simply grateful for the breath and for another day. Then, throughout this day that I am so thankful for, I try and remember a beautiful Jewish concept I once heard about that never left my consciousness. Some say that our soul comes into this earth to bring light to the darkness. Whether you believe this to be completely true or not is up to you but I'd say it's a pretty good concept to live by. To try and take the dark things in this world and make them light, to make things better, make a change somewhere, an effort in something is pretty good motivation for life if you ask me. Imagine if everyone around you thought about doing this. So when it's time for the *Bedtime Shema* and some evening prayers, my intent, or *kavanah*, is more about reflection. I reflect on the day and its happenings and I love having a presence to check in with. "How did I do today, G-d?" I ask. In prayer, I can almost say, "That was good how I did that, right?" or "I could've reacted better to this."

Yes, he answers. That might be for another conversation but in his way, he answers.

Now, I don't know exactly how he forgives everyone that has harmed me when I ask for that, but asking him for it gives me peace. Almost as if by asking him to forgive you, I too have forgiven you. Nonetheless, I am able to go to sleep with peace, wake up, give thanks, and do it again. Give life another shot.

When I say the *Shema*, I feel a PULL inside of me on the words *Adonai*. Almost like I'm really calling out to something, to whatever is out there listening and answering prayers, almost desperately, to hear me, to see my faith and to please stay with me because life is so tough. I stay connected with him daily so that when I sit and weep in *shul* he remembers who I am. It's me again, and this time I seriously need you. I stay connected so that when a child of mine is born and I praise life with tears of joy, he knows who I am and that this time I'm just extremely happy.

This is why I hated Gillman's book at first. I just didn't understand why we needed to analyze the texts so much. An entire chapter on the *Shema*?! I wondered. Why? "*It's JUST Gd,*" I thought, "*Let it go!*" I even felt a little stupid because I didn't have the deep thoughts Gillman and my classmates were having, I just have this basic simple faith where I just accept things because it feels good. Maybe I'm not as elevated as they are intellectually. It doesn't bother me to say "Him" or "He", it's just how it was written, it's OLD, don't change it just love it for what it is. I don't ponder if Gd really has hands or not because I don't care. I focus on the gratitude, reflection, or prayer not on the over analysis of whether or not it's a metaphor and who wrote it when and why. Of course the philosopher in me eventually popped its head out and I grew fascinated with all the texts and interpretations. I stopped reading it as instructional and instead as interesting perspectives; and who doesn't love that? I'm already moved by the texts in our *siddurim* and if someone is talking *Torah*, they have my undivided attention so I loved the excerpts in the book.

So am I traditional or modern? I don't know.

What's my personal theology? I'm not sure.

I know that I use traditions to create a modern practice.

I know that I utilize traditional texts to make sense of my modern, crazy life.

I know that Gd is an essence much bigger than the word 'He' or 'She'.

I know that there is a peace that comes with Gd. For example, the peace inside the sanctuary when we pray together & feel we may get a better listen. The peace in this room while we share our spirituality with each other; that is Gd.

I know that my faith gives ME peace. I'd like to think I can spread my peace to others. That is Gd to me. I pray for more people to find this peace, because imagine a world where everyone was able to just let go, open up their hearts and let love in. Who else could I pray to for that?