

**On Judaism**  
**Essay by Rabbi Brad L. Bloom**  
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I began to define my faith in God and in humanity from reading Genesis 2:9, when God addressed Adam in the Garden of Eden after he had disobeyed God's command not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. God said quite simply, "Where are you?" This question is what religion is all about, because it is the question that God asks all human beings. Religion is the response to God's question for all human kind.

I began to be more interested in this question when I discovered that Judaism allows for and nurtures in us the instinct not only to obey Divine Law or the Torah from Sinai, but also to look inward at ourselves. God wants us to question and challenge by learning and penetrating the sacred texts, beginning with the Torah and including the entire Bible. For me, study became the primary vehicle to find out the answer to the question, "Where are you?"

For when I open the pages of the Hebrew Scriptures or the Talmud and I see what the sages have written going back over two thousand years, I know that I am not only reading their words, but I am in a great dialogue with the Eternal One who delights when I peruse, probe and penetrate the multiple meanings of Biblical and Rabbinic texts. This is where my faith in God and in tradition originated. This is the basis from which I enter into the holy of holies of God's scriptures. It is this journey that comprises the historic covenant relationship that my people have with God.

I also respond to the question, "Where are you?" through the pages of communal and private worship. Judaism is a faith that emerges out of the communal moment of God's theophany at Sinai where God brought the sacred and beloved law to the Jewish people. It is a covenant relationship which means both God and Israel have responsibilities to uphold their promises to each other. Communal worship services are critical for me not only to lead my congregation in prayer, but also for me to renew myself and my relationship with the Divine.

Even as a rabbi, it is easy to become distracted by the many tasks and demands put upon my daily schedule in helping others. So it is critical to stay centered on maintaining an active spiritual life where private and communal prayer revive and keep me going in the right direction. I see prayer as the platform from which I can speak to God with my own personal questions and concerns. I believe that prayer is not only reading from the prayer book, but it also means singing and meditating and simply sitting in silence. Prayer provides a variety of avenues to reach out and tell God where I am in this world and hope God is listening to me.

My tradition says, "Pray as if everything depended upon God; Act as if everything depended upon you." This is one of my favorite teachings in Judaism, because it recognizes that human beings need to call upon their inner strength to meet the challenges of life as well as know when to call upon God for strength and guidance. We need both our own conviction and faith in God's hearing us to live in this world. This proverb also reminds us that we are obligated to care for each other and take action when we see injustice.

Finally, my faith comes from a deep abiding trust in the history of the Jewish people to transcend the many challenges often stemming from misunderstanding and sometimes hatred, which has followed us throughout history. I refer most recently to the Holocaust and to the state of Israel, which represent two ends of the spectrum of Jewish faith. With faith comes hope, and that too has sustained me in difficult times as well as my people throughout Jewish history. When God says, “Where are you?” I feel like I belong to a historic continuum of shared experiences and solidarity with generations in the past who sustained and preserved their Jewish religiosity and passed it down to me. It is a privilege to be a Jew and a great responsibility to pass down the teachings and practices to the next generation.

Thirty years after ordination as a Rabbi has taught me that questioning my faith and questioning the ways of God does not mean doubting God. In fact the beauty of Judaism is that the dialogue with God is ongoing and only strengthens faith. We see this throughout the Torah with Abraham, Moses and even Job who challenged God as he contended with the suffering that God used to test his faith.

I do not have the answers to the questions of life, but I call upon my faith and belief that with God’s presence in my life, I can respond to the needs of my congregation, the Jewish people and fulfill the sacred word of scripture that God gave us long ago.

“Where are you?” I am still working on an answer!

*Rabbi Bloom has 27 years of rabbinic experience having served in synagogues across the country—from Florida to California to the Midwest and Deep South, and now here in Hilton Head. Prior to his appointment at Congregation Beth Yam, he was the Senior Rabbi at Temple Shalom in Naples, Florida for 2 years.*