

I had my first theological crisis on my grandparents' front porch in Pittsburgh, PA, in Squirrel Hill to be exact. I was 4 years old, rolling a big red fire truck along the poured cement porch floor. I played alone, making suitable siren noises wearing an oversized plastic fireman's helmet. I wasn't paying close attention to the porch topography – hey, I had fires to put out – and so I tripped over an electric cord. I fell hard, skinning one of my knees. I wailed loudly, because it hurt and because I was four and because I had drawn blood. All of these facts caught the attention of my cousin, Ilene, who was 8 years older than me. She walked onto the porch and looked at me sprawled on the floor. “You know why you fell?” she asked. She wasn't asking me some standard sort of question. No, her question had an existential ring to it, not that I knew then what the word meant. But I did realize that I was about to receive a life teaching from my big cousin, Ilene, who knew everything as far as I could tell. “How come I fell down, Cousin Ilene?” “It's God punishing you for something you did, that's why. You must have been a bad boy.”

I remember sitting there on the floor of the patio, sniffing, rubbing my sore knee, trying to digest this lesson about God that I had just been taught. I

fell down and got hurt because I did something wrong and was getting punished by God. So that means that God thinks I'm a bad boy.

But even at age 4, something in all of this simple made no sense to me.

Why would God hurt me? I mean, how bad could a 4 year old be?

Especially one who was already terrified of an avenging father? Now I actually recall obsessing over this question for what seemed like hours, which in the life of a four year old may as well be a month.

Later that same day, on that same porch, now filled with various grown ups who were chowing down on deli, I decided to further explore this question. As I rubbed my now bandaged knee, I pondered this conundrum. Was there a connection between my behavior and my physical well-being? *Does* God watch everything I do, and reward or punish me based on my behavior? Do I deserve to be injured by God? Have I behaved so egregiously as to have it coming?

Perhaps because already at age four I had been physically punished by adults for things I could not prevent or that I flat out knew I didn't do, I had developed a skepticism about the correctness of punishment altogether. I did not deserve to be brutalized by God—or by anyone else.

So I asked, "Mommy, is God everywhere?" She looked up at me from amongst the piles of deli meat and Dr. Brown's sodas, slightly surprised.

"Umm, Yes, God is everywhere." "Is God in the sky?" "Yes, honey, God is in the sky." "Is God in the floor?" "Honey, God is everywhere, in everything."

Whereupon I started slapping the cement porch floor. "What are you doing?" various adults exclaimed. It made sense to me; "I'm mad at God for hurting me. I hate God." The psychological ramifications aside, I was facing my first crisis of faith. And all the adults did was laugh at my childish irreverence. "Don't say that", they said, not realizing how deep this moment was for a little boy who was frightened of his father and determined not to be afraid of God, too.

What kind of God causes pain in innocent children? What kind of God allows for the profoundly heartbreaking reality that we can glance 24/7 in every newspaper, website, or tv news show? Who is this God? How can anyone love this God? How can anyone hope to attain even crumbs of compassion from this God with the metaphysical demeanor of the

Ayatollah Khomeini: cold, pitiless, unsmiling... Who can really believe in this God?

The answer is, not too many us. No, this wizened, desiccated version of God has about as much relevance to us today as a reel to reel tape: a legitimate historical relic, an honest recording, but unplayable on our contemporary equipment. Or to put it another way, this 2 dimensional sense of God does not compute.

This is the God that made some sense to our ancestors, a God so powerful and strong that He could destroy the most powerful enemy without hesitation, without remorse. For a people struggling to define itself amongst the pagan universe, a muscular and judgmental God was necessary. But now?

The God I confronted on my grandparents' porch so long ago was the God of my disbelief, the God I could not believe in.

Who is the God that you don't believe in? As Clark Strand asks in the opening of his fabulous book, *How To Believe in God*: "Is it the God who separates the saved from the damned, reserving bliss for the blessed, and

brimstone for the nonbeliever? Or perhaps the narrow-minded God who resists new ways of thinking, the God who will brook no question and no discourse, the one who prefers the way the world was before feminism or civil rights, before the discovery of evolution and quantum physics?"

Who is the God you don't believe in? It's actually an easy question, isn't it? You could easily whip up a detailed description. But now let me ask you the corollary question: who is the God you DO believe in?

Every year I am inevitably approached by a few loving parents with a look of panic in their eyes. I can usually tell by the level of panic they're radiating that they have a "God question." It's not their question; it's their child's question, and they really want to give the right answer, and they feel utterly clueless on how to handle it. "My child asked me who made God?" or, "My kid's goldfish died and wants to know if fish go to Heaven; and then she wanted to know if there IS a Heaven? So Rabbi, is there?"

These bright, thoughtful parents are seeking to give their progeny a path to God, some sort of cogent direction. And they're honest enough to come to their rabbi as a God expert, because they simply don't regularly have God

on their minds. They don't know how to talk about God. Which is understandable, because, really who wants to talk about God?

Recent books by Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*), and Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), among others, claim that belief in God is nothing other than superstition, cynical thirst for power, willful ignorance, and atavistic, unevolved behavior. Then add to this the recent movie by Bill Maher, titled "Religulous," a cross between the words 'religion', and 'ridiculous.' In this film, Maher claims that he doesn't know enough about God, that he just wants to interview people in hopes of getting some real answers about God. But as anyone who has heard his shtick can tell you, Mahre already made up his mind long before the first interview: there is no God, and anyone who says that there is a God is a buffoon. This is meant to be a laugh a minute. Mahre tracks down whacky, colorful extremists of various religions, asks them a variety of questions, and then smirks as they answer, with an occasional nudge nudge wink wink at the camera. At no point during the film does Mahre talk to a contemporary person of religion about God or faith. At no point does Mahre seek reasonable discourse about

God. Religulous is less a documentary and more like *Borat*. Bill Mahre sets out to prove that religion is absolutely ridiculous and God is a joke.

The young Jewish musician Regina Spektor, while in her teens, came to this country from Russia 10 or 12 years ago. She has written a provocative song about God.

God can be funny,
When told he'll give you money if you just pray the right way
And when presented like a genie who does magic like Houdini
Or grants wishes like Jiminy Cricket and Santa Claus
God can be so hilarious: ha ha.

Only Regina Spektor does not leave it there in the zone of oversimplification and cynicism. She reminds us that if we're honest, we have to acknowledge that sometimes God is not so funny.

No one laughs at God in a hospital
No one laughs at God in a war
No one's laughing at God
When they're starving or freezing or so very poor

No one laughs at God
When the doctor calls after some routine tests
No one's laughing at God
When it's gotten real late
And their kid's not back from the party yet

No one laughs at God
When their airplane start to uncontrollably shake
No one's laughing at God
When they see the one they love, hand in hand with someone else
And they hope that they're mistaken

No one laughs at God
When the cops knock on their door
And they say we got some bad news, sir
No one's laughing at God
When there's a famine or fire or flood
No one laughs at God on the day they realize
That the last sight they'll ever see is a pair of hateful eyes
No one's laughing at God when they're saying their goodbyes

No one's laughing at God.

Spektor's song electrified me the first time I heard it because she succinctly captures all of our post modern ambivalence about God. I believe that even in our most alienated, jaded moods, turned off from and by the God of our disbelief, there are times that we instinctively desire to reach out for God. In moments of crisis or loss or fear we're not quoting Bill Mahre or Christopher Hitchens for strength and support. In the scary, lonely places of our lives, we're not smirking, we're not laughing at God.

Only we haven't talked about God with anyone, not even with our partners or our parents or our children or our closest friends. So we feel

inadequate. We think that there must be some official answers to the hard questions of life and the hard questions our children might ask.

Because we don't talk about God, we're not sure how to talk TO God in a genuine way. We feel bereft. All we have is a slight two dimensional cut out of God that we have long since outgrown. In almost every other aspect of our lives we have improved, we have evolved. Our palates have grown more sophisticated, our eyes more discerning, our ears more astute. But for many of us, our concepts of God are so malnourished and meagre. All too often, what we have is the faded God of our disbelief, the cement floor of a porch.

The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism, once said, "People stand here weeping. They cry, I am lost and in darkness. All they have to do is move their hands. They're only in darkness because they are holding their hands over their eyes."

In the movie, *Field of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella builds a baseball field right in the middle of his cornfield after he hears a voice that tells him, no, commands, "If you build it, he will come." In time, the souls of various

dead ballplayers begin to appear on the field, and they play ball. Kinsella can see them clearly, as can his wife and daughter. He even plays catch with them. But when his well meaning, materialistic brother-in-law, Mark, arrives to foreclose on Ray's property, all that Mark can see is wasted farmland. He can't see the ballplayers. He's so committed to his vision of the world that he can't acknowledge that there is something more out there. Mark is holding his own hands in front of his eyes and saying, "I can't see anything so there can't be anything out there." He's unable to see them because he lacks faith in Ray's vision. When Mark experiences a traumatic moment, when he's shaken up, he looks up and suddenly he says, "'Hey who are all those guys out there?'"

They're only in darkness because they hold their hands over their eyes.

The iconic Hasidic master, Menachem Mendel Morganstern, the Kotzker Rebbe, was sitting with some of his younger disciples, studying Talmud. One of the students looked up and said, "With all due respect, Rebbe, we study day in and day out. Yet at times I feel a great despair. Rebbe, where is God?"

The Kotzker Rebbe stopped and pondered the student's question. Now, his answer has been incorrectly translated in most English language texts. Most books say that the Kotzker smiles and says, "God is wherever we let God in." But this is an incorrect translation. Because this implies that God is not present until we determine. But God is present, always present. Not the big, scary God of our disbelief. Not the avenging God of war. Not the bearded God on a cloud or the punishing God of the cement floor. Not the vending machine God with which we put in a prayer and out pops a wish. Not the Bill Mahre God caricature, the punchline God. Not the cold cynic's God of the unevolved human.

The Kotzker smiles and says, "God is whenever we let God in." God is there, waiting for us, waiting with love and acceptance and the power to heal the soul, to move forward knowing that we're not alone.

We don't have to sit in the dark: move your hands from your eyes. God is right here, right now, whenever you let God in.