GOD TALK
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz – Temple Sholom
Second Day Rosh Hashanah 5774

The Rabbinic Search process was a fascinating experience on a number of levels. While the intent was for congregations to learn about me as a rabbi and a human being (not that those two categories are mutually exclusive) – it was also an opportunity for me to interview them, a lens into organized (or disorganized) Judaism in North America.

In one of those interviews a member of a search committee, not from Temple Sholom asked me a question that I really never anticipated. She asked in front of a room full fellow search committee members, 'Rabbi I have read many of your sermons and writings online, you seem to talk a lot about God, is that something we can expect if we hire you as our rabbi?"

I was unprepared, surprise really, I never thought I would be asked to justifying why I talked about God in a sermon. Not that the individual was wrong to ask me, they were certainly not, in fact

asking is an important point that I will come to in just a moment, but I had to think, "What's wrong with talking about God?"

We talk about God a lot these days, or maybe read about God is more accurate. Books with titles such as The God Delusion, A History of God, God Is Not Great, Conversations with God consistently lead the NY Times Best seller's list.

God has never been so popular or unpopular depending on which of the books and articles you read. And so that a Rabbi might mention God more than in passing during a sermon you would think wouldn't raise anybody's eyebrows but at least for that interviewer in that congregation it did. And if there is one thing a Rabbi loves to see it is raised eyebrows during a sermon, it lets us know people are awake.

So with eyebrows raised lets talk about God! Some fundamental questions:

1. Does God Exist?
2. Is God active in our world?

3. Did God create the universe and everything in it?
4. What does God require of us?

I know what you're saying – this is going to be a long sermon – come'on Rabbi we were here all day yesterday and have to be back in 10 days. I truly feel your pain – they are not easy questions and they do not have simple answers. But as I spoke of yesterday the High Holy Days are a time of *rachamim* of compassion and empathy so I'll give you the – Cliff's Notes version of my answers:

1. Yes
2. Yes
3. I'm not sure
4. That we be holy

End of sermon! Shanah Tovah!

Tempting I know, but my parents flew in from San Francisco and so I think we should go a little deeper. Good questions deserve time and thoughtful answers. Indeed those four questions,

inpsire a 5th question that must be answered before we can tackle the others. "Are we even allowed to ask these questions? Is it kosher to question God and God's existence?"

In Judaism we celebrate the question, sometimes more than the answer itself. Think of the Passover Seder with its Four Questions, our biblical ancestors questioning and challenging God. If you read the pages of the Talmud you discover that there are more questions than answers, indeed every answer leads only to more questions. It is not that things are unknowable in Judaism - that we have no answers. In fact on Yom Kippur we will read that the ways of Torah are precisely not beyond our grasp, *Lo bashamayim he*, they are not way up in heavens but accessible to the human mind and this is why we have so many questions. We know we have the capacity to know and understand, but it takes serious thought and study. Questioning God, arguing with God, struggling with God is essential to our tradition. Indeed it is what it means to be Jewish – to be Am Yisrael.

The world *Yisrael*, literally means, to struggle with God Yisra = to struggle El = God. The word comes from many places but most notably the greatest struggler of all Jacob who wrestled with God physically and intellectually. At one point challenging God to prove God's own existence by making Jacob's journey a safe one. The biblical equivalent of the prayers many of us offer on an airplane when we encounter turbulence. Yes it is ok to ask these questions – one way we come to know God is by struggling.

So let's struggle together – we are not alone in our questioning, indeed far from it, to these fundamental questions of theology and belief our tradition offers many different answers, - you know the old joke 2 Jews 3 opinions – I think it probably originated from a discussion about God.

Rabbi Brown and I have prepared 10 responses from across the spectrum of Jewish thought to those four questions.

1. Does God Exist?
2. Is God active in our world?
3. Did God create the universe and everything in it?
4. What does God require of us?

Take a moment to read each question and each response and choose the one that best fits your own personal belief. When you have your four answers find 2 or 3 other people sitting near you and discuss why you connected with the answer you chose. We'll take a few minutes to do this now.