

# SPAFFER

A Forum for Exploring Religion

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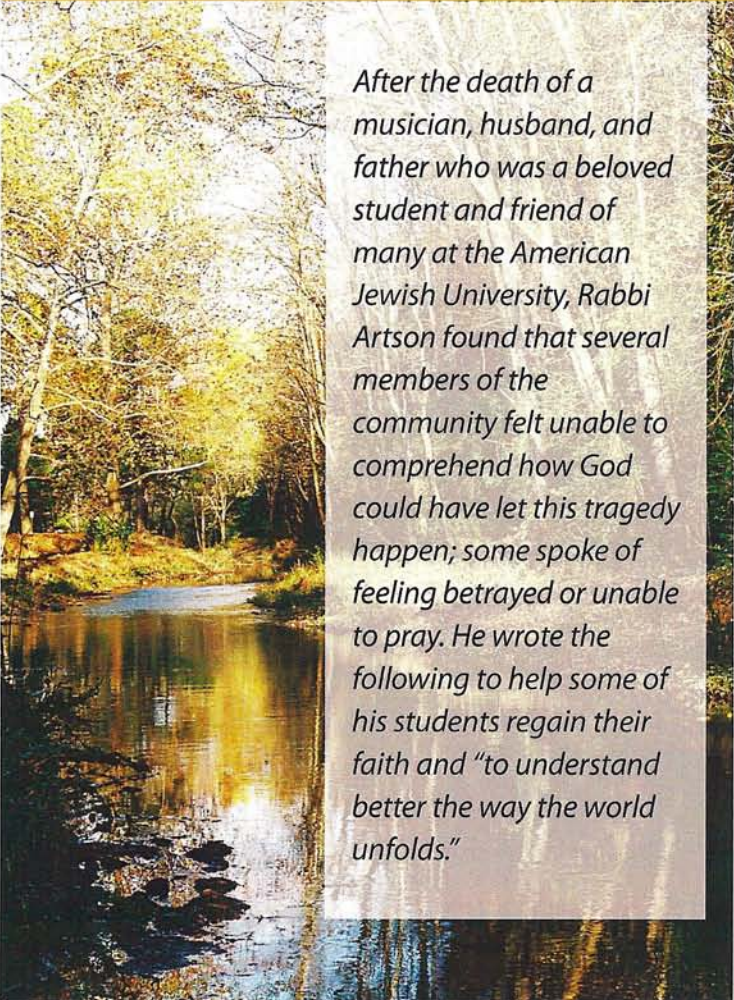
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## God is Becoming: Consolation in the Face of Tragedy

by Bradley Artson [This article originally appeared in Tikkun Magazine (May/June 2009) and is reprinted here with the author's permission]



*After the death of a musician, husband, and father who was a beloved student and friend of many at the American Jewish University, Rabbi Artson found that several members of the community felt unable to comprehend how God could have let this tragedy happen; some spoke of feeling betrayed or unable to pray. He wrote the following to help some of his students regain their faith and "to understand better the way the world unfolds."*

I start with the belief that we perceive the world as a collection of things—mostly static, isolated objects that interact but remain separate. Being is the core of that ontology. I believe that science joins faith to demonstrate that this perception is a distortion.

The core of reality is not being (which is an intellectual abstraction) but becoming, which is the key characteristic of all, including God. The universe is a welter of endless change, as we and all around us reach the present as the result of the choices we have made, the “choices” creation has made, and the God-infused lure toward innovation, creativity, and righteousness that is always inviting us toward goodness. Process thinker Charles Hartshorne referred to that not as “ontology” but as “Hyathology,” from God’s dynamic name revealed to Moshe—I am becoming what I am becoming (*ehyeh asher ehyeh*).

I believe that God, in choosing to create, created us really. That means that our independence is not illusory or ephemeral. We, along with all creation, have real agency, and the choices we make are truly untrammelled, unprogrammed, and unforeseen by God. God is vulnerable to surprise and disappointment just as we are. The universe unfolds according to its own inner logic; the laws of physics operate, and God cannot/does not suspend them based on moral standards. As Rabbi Harold Kushner says, asking the universe to treat you better because you

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...feeling the beauty around us, smelling its scents, touching the earth and sky, connecting to others, working for justice, these are encounters with all and the All, and they offer the relationship and connection that is life's true consolation."

are moral is like expecting the bull not to charge because you are a vegetarian. I believe that God did irrevocable *tzimtzum* (withdrawal), creating the reality of our own autonomy and agency, along with all creation.

I believe that people misunderstand the nature of divine "power" as coercive, as omnipotence, which I regard as a philosophical mistake, a religious disaster, and a source of emotional and ethical torment. Thinking of God as having all the power leaves us rightly feeling betrayed and abandoned ("was I not good enough for God to intervene?"). It leaves theologians in the position of Job's friends - discounting our core ethical knowledge in an attempt to defend the indefensible. We do know good and evil: God infuses us with that awareness. And someone dying young, someone struggling with special needs, illness, or poverty is indefensible, especially if God is omnipotent. Hiding behind "it's a mystery," or "we can't understand," or "it's all for the best" is, in my opinion, worse than unsatisfying, because it requires either blaming the victim or denying our ethical compass.

I don't think we have to abandon a conviction of a loving God. But I invite us to grow past an almighty one. If God has truly ceded to creation the ability to make choices, then God didn't kill the innocent, didn't allocate disability, didn't impose poverty. Looking for God in special effects causes us to mistake theater or science fiction for life. God is found not in the suspension of nature's laws, but in the intrusion of novelty and surprise from within fixed law, in the abiding nature of hope, and in the transforming power of love (a power that is persuasive, not coercive).

When my beloved student struggled with what became a terminal illness, I saw God being very busy throughout his

struggle – in moments of laughter and song, in the strength of the relating that bound us all as a community and kept my student feeling connected through his very last minutes, in the determination to be there with and for his family throughout and beyond the ordeal. I never expected God to guarantee an outcome or suspend the natural. I did expect to find God in the steady constant lure toward good choices

and responsibility. And that God did not disappoint.

One last thought: if God is the ultimate exemplar of process, of the focus on becoming rather than being, then God absorbs and is affected by all that happens, by all our choices, by the ways that nature proceeds. Our sorrows are not lost - they permanently become part of the divine. Our joys and our lives are not forgotten, they are eternally and objectively real in the divine mind. In that way, I can affirm that my student's life is not ended, although he is no longer visible to our eyes. He, too, is a process, and the process never ends.

In the face of loss and grief, I offer the affirmation that our love and prayers and heart connect us to each other and to creation - that feeling the beauty around us, smelling its scents, touching the earth

and sky, connecting to others, working for justice, these are encounters with all and the All, and they offer the relationship and connection that is life's true consolation.

