

RABBI DR. MICHAEL MARMUR: HOW WE TALK ABOUT GOD

(Begin audio)

HOLO: Welcome to the College Commons Bully Pulpit Podcast, Torah with a Point of View, produced by the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, America's first Jewish Institution of higher learning. My name is Joshua Holo, your host and Dean of the Jack H. Skirball campus in Los Angeles. It's my pleasure to welcome Michael Marmur who is the Provost of the Hebrew Union College Jewish Institute of Religion, my friend and colleague, and Scholar of Jewish Thought. Michael, thank you for joining us.

MARMUR: It's very good to be here.

HOLO: So we're going to talk about God. And I'd like you to help us frame the question by telling us what you think is missing in the conversation about God these days.

MARMUR: Any conversation about God immediately runs the risk of saying extremely stupid things. And I run that risk as everybody else does. It is actually a subject about which there are no experts. There are people who may spend all of their lives contemplating, thinking, talking about God but almost by definition if...

HOLO: There's no way to test it.

MARMUR: Right. Whatever one means by God, if it has any meaning at all it means something that's beyond my capacity to know much about it. I remember meeting a famed scholar of Jewish thought who was being a little snarky about one of the great figures of Jewish theology. And he said to me, "This guy always talked about silence and the importance of silence, and how God is inexpressible. But he certainly spent a great deal of time talking about the inexpressible." So this is my way of saying I'm amused the concept of me telling you what's wrong with the God discussion because this is part of the answer. But having said that...

HOLO: One point quickly though, it does raise the question that theology is intrinsically irreligious.

MARMUR: That's, of course, been a particularly strong trope in Jewish circles where people have often looked askance at the theological enterprise. I would say this, taking some time to focus one's thoughts about what we really mean when we use these terms is not contrary to our tradition. People have been doing it for a long time. The names we give that enterprise and the fancy footnotes we add to it, you know, that you could argue is a foreign import from the beginning of the very strong and rich Jewish theological tradition. There's always been some folks on the side saying, "You can't do that. That's not the way we Jews

do it.” But, you know, I think of Philo of Alexandria and Saadia Gaon, you could go through the whole list, people have been doing this non-Jewish thing for thousands of years.

HOLO: Right. And running into resistance along the way. It’s not so much, I think, the thinking about God that they resist it’s the systematization of the thinking of God that they resist at times. I think that’s what you’re referring to, if I’m understanding it.

MARMUR: Right. There is this term that sometimes you call systematic theology which is certainly comes to us through a Christian prism. And there the idea is you say it’s a whole set of different questions about what God can do and did God pick up a stone that was too heavy. And you go through a sort of set of hoops. We’re having this conversation just a few days after the death of Eugene Borowitz, one of the great professors of our institution and really the doyenne of liberal Jewish philosophy, Jewish theologians in our time. His life is testament to the fact that trying to think deeply, responsibly, honestly about these kind of questions, including what we mean when we say God, is an important thing to do and a worthwhile project.

You asked me earlier what I thought was lacking in the current debate. After all God sells copy big time. Right? Always has but now both for and against. Right? And it’s not surprising that as there are more and more expressions of what you might call an extreme fundamentalist approach to religious belief, you have a reaction to that where you’ve got folks both from the scientific community as well as publicists and journalists and philosophers who feel the need to point out the God delusion, to cite one of the famous examples of this kind of literature. I find that dichotomy to be unsatisfactory. I think framing the question as, “Is God there or not there?” As if we’re asking the same question, the folks listening to this, the millions of people listening to this can’t see whether I have a red ball attached to the end of my nose or not, asking the question, “Do I or don’t I?” And there’s only one factual answer to that question and thinking that’s the same as asking the question, “Is God there or not? Is there a God or not?” It seems to me to be the kind of poverty of the discourse if we limit it or reduce it to a simple question of existence or non-existence.

HOLO: I understand why it’s lacking in dimensionality and texture the way you’re posing it. But that binary, as problematic as it is, isn’t it also a binary forced upon the religious spirit by the enlightenment? If you have a religious spirit and you’re confronted by science and all that the modern world offers, even if it lacks dimension and even if it is oversimplified, isn’t it also not unavoidable for a religiously minded person?

MARMUR: Maybe. I just have to stop and remove the red ball from the end of my nose. Yes, the intellectual currents in the Western world over the last few centuries have had an enormous impact on the way people think about and talk about God. And yes it’s become this kind of a scientific proposition.

HOLO: An affirmative one that has to be.

MARMUR: Either $E=mc^2$ or it doesn’t, right. So you have the same sort of question. I think it’s interesting to point out that, you know, science also moves on and changes. And recently

there have been attempts made, I would say interesting, significant attempts made, to dive into contemporary scientific discourse and discussion which offers you more opportunities, more possibilities than the simple yes or no binary equation.

I'll give you a couple of examples. Arthur Green, a very important Jewish thinking of our time, alludes to Darwinian notions of evolution. He says, you know, "Rather than ask the simple and silly question is it God or evolution, what might it mean to think about God in terms of evolution, an unfolding God of process, a God of becoming?" Or another example would be Brad Artson asks what physics and cosmology might have to tell us or how metaphors, at least, taken from that world could inform and enrich a conversation about God. So what I'm saying to you is, yes, the enlightenment and particularly modern science and changes in social and philosophical thinking have greatly influenced our theological discourse. But it doesn't all lead to this simple binary approach.

HOLO: Okay. So maybe it starts at the binary approach but it certainly doesn't end there. And you want to take us to another dimension of this conversation. And where is that you want to take us?

MARMUR: I want to talk about God in language which may sound particularly silly. We using language as we speak. But we often, in theological discourse the God conversation ask the question, "Is God in here, inside me, or God out there radically apart and different from me?" When you think about language as a phenomenon, the poverty of that question is it in here or out there becomes clear because language is clearly in both places at once. It is in here there are all sorts of debates amongst experts in this area as to whether we are hardwired for language upon birth.

HOLO: As a species.

MARMUR: As a species. And, you know, Noam Chomsky and others have written extensively. And there's a whole debate which I'm not going to get involved in here. But it obviously lives inside, but language I think patently doesn't only live inside. It needs an external reference in order to become the thing it is. So is God a static, eternal, unchanging thing or a growing thing? Well language, again, is fascinating. Just think about the phenomenon of language. Language is constantly changing and growing. When somebody corrects you on some point of grammar and tells you you've said something wrong, you should take the long view and tell them that in 500 years they'll be wrong because what happens in language is while we're convinced that it's a stable thing, which some people know better than others, it is in fact a growing and changing thing, okay?

HOLO: Subject to forces both conservative holding it back from change and dynamic encouraging change. And there's a negotiation going on.

MARMUR: Exactly. So what I'm saying is – the first thing I'm saying in the conversation is that thinking about the phenomenon of language and then making a jump which is not usually made to thinking about the phenomenon of God, there are a number of parallels which present themselves that I think are worth encouraging. I'll give you one more. Is the God that we perceive of as a commanding God who tells us, you know, how we ought to live

and what we ought to be? Or is this a God who is kind of a brooding presence who never quite is articulate? Language is fascinating in this regard as well. You might say language is just a few letters in the alphabet and then we decide what we're going to do with them. But actually it seems to be much more complicated than that. We are programmed by language in all sorts of ways. Our thought processes – there's a big debate among linguists...

HOLO: Whorf theory and whether language forms our consciousness, or consciousness forms our language.

MARMUR: Exactly. There are all kinds of different theories out there. But right now there's a very hot debate, I think, as to whether different languages tell you something fundamentally different about the world.

HOLO: Right. Or if it's just another way of saying the same thing.

MARMUR: I remember reading the wonderful book called *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*. Saying that Greeks and Hebrews look at the world in radically different ways. Okay? Greek is about the aesthetic. It's about sight. The Greek language paints you a picture or shows you a snapshot, whereas the Hebrew language with the auditory, with what you hear. It's dynamic, it's unfolding. So that when you say in Hebrew, *Ani kam* - I'm standing, you're both describing the motion, the dynamic of getting there and the result of being, you know, "stood up" as it were.

HOLO: As construed by the grammar of the word itself, it shapes your understanding.

MARMUR: So here, well the reason I'm mentioning this is there's a big and fascinating debate, for me at least, as to whether we're all living in our lives in whichever culture, housed in whatever reality, it's all basically one thing and we just find different iterations of language to express it. Or whether our cultural programming, the languages that we're born into, create thought worlds for us which both enrich on the one hand and limits what we can see and what we can imagine. There's a fascinating debate amongst linguists regarding color language. We're pretty convinced that we know what's blue and what's green.

HOLO: Right.

MARMUR: It's not clear however if this is an absolute distinction, in fact we know it isn't an absolute distinction because there's a blue-green, and turquoise and all the rest of it.

HOLO: Of course. There are cultures, by the way, that only have dark and light. That have no color distinction beyond that.

MARMUR: So to bring this back. Why is all this got anything to do, apart from being intrinsically interesting and worthwhile and good evidence that you should find somebody who unlike me know about it and learn from them, I'm interested all the time in bringing this back to the kind of conversations we have about God. And to say that I'm looking for a spectrum of discourse about our God language, if you like, which is more rich, more

interesting, more nuanced and less clumsy than a simple “God’s there, God isn’t there” kind of a discussion.

HOLO: Let me draw you out on this a little bit. If we engage in a spectral conversation about God where we realize aspects of God or God’s character will not be conveniently categorized as yellow or green, when we recognize that the border between yellow and green are intrinsically complicated or not even there depending on how you look at it. That’s fine. But an essentialist, the person who prefers the binary as opposed to the dynamic spectral point of view would say, great, you know what? Between green and blue or green and yellow, I appreciate that there is a blurring which is interesting and textured and dimensional. However, there is no blurriness between the extremes on the spectrum. Red is not – I don’t know what’s on the other end of a spectrum. Blue or whatever it is. That there’s a point at which the thing ceases to be the thing even if along the way you can’t necessarily point to when that disjuncture takes place. But nevertheless, we see it happens. What is A is not B. How do you address that fact that forces you, at least to reckon with the binary view of things even if the binary view tries to be partially spectral as well?

MARMUR: So I’m going to say two things, you’re right and you’re wrong.

HOLO: I don’t like the second thing.

MARMUR: Let’s take them in order. You’re right. I mean I’m sure you’re right about everything.

HOLO: I’m glad we agree. We can now talk.

MARMUR: But to my mind you’re right when you say, certain truth claims are either true or they’re not. So if I say to you, Josh, you know, if someone we both know, okay, is, *has ve-halila* (God forbid), unwell and then they get better in what we might call a miraculous way, or in perish the thought they don’t get well. Okay, and out of the blue something terrible happens. And if I come along and say, “God did this.” And not only did God do this, God did this because that person...

HOLO: Somehow deserved it.

MARMUR: Their fate.

HOLO: Either way, right.

MARMUR: That’s a statement – that’s telling a story of cause and effect. Okay. If we’re talking at that level of resolution, I’m inclined to agree with you one can’t have it all ways. My conversations about God are bounded by three parameters. One of them is what I call should or ought. What from the traditions that I embody, which in my case are Jewish tradition and also certain kind of Western European tradition, what kind of ideas of God have been out there? There’s a wonderful passage at the beginning of a medieval work called *Duties of the Heart* by Bahya ibn Paquda where he lists at the beginning of his work what you ought to think about God.

HOLO: That's the purpose.

MARMUR: Okay. So that's one aspect. The next is not what should I think about God, what can I think about God? What can I, in good conscience, in honesty, in integrity say about God? So I may find in the example that I just gave you when somebody comes to me and says, "This person was saved because God intervened and saved," or, "this person died as divine wrath and punishment." I want to say I cannot sign up for that way of understanding God's inscrutable – suddenly God's inscrutable wisdom becomes very scrutable and somebody's prepared to say exactly what God has in mind. I can't do that. Okay? And therefore, I live in the tension between the should and the can. And the third part of this triangle with what I would call the must. I will have experiences, okay, things that will well up within me which may not suit my intellectual categories.

HOLO: Or your inherited traditions.

MARMUR: My inherited tradition. But there is something of the prophetic tradition in each one of us. And when our great biblical prophets talk about the God who speaks from within them, okay, or the voice that wells up.

HOLO: Often in contradiction also with the should.

MARMUR: Absolutely.

HOLO: Explicitly.

MARMUR: In contradiction or intention both with the should and with the can. I've had moments of *zeh 'eli va-anvehu* - "This is my God and I will glorify, beautify, build Him up....," whatever you want to say. Or *zeh hayom 'asah Adonai* - "This is the day that God made..." where I'm not sure if I were ready to break it down. Do I think God made this day and not yesterday's crappy day? But I can't deny that's...

HOLO: Welling up.

MARMUR: My God discourse lives in the kind of triangle that is delineated by these three axis of should, can, and must. I said before you were both right and wrong and I don't want to spare you from the wrong. You're right, I'm arguing or I agree with you that's what I'm really saying, that sometimes a statement is either true or it isn't true. But here's what I want to say why I disagree with you.

Metaphor. Metaphor is a completely fascinating area. We have a colleague on our New York campus Andrea Weiss who's written beautifully about it. And another colleague on the Cincinnati campus David Aaron who's also written significantly and for that matter other colleagues who have dealt with different aspects of metaphor. I want to give you a metaphor about metaphor. We use it to denote abstraction but it is always based, so I believe, on something very physical.

You know, in the Hebrew language we experience this all the time. If I say to you in Hebrew *'af al pi ken*, which means something like “nevertheless,” I’m actually saying... *'af al pi ken* could be in the certain or hyperliteralist way understood as meaning nose on mouth yes. Okay? Now how does nose on mouth yes become nevertheless? Well very physical things, Hebrew’s very strong in this regard but English is full of this as well, in any sentence I’m using I’m going to use a bunch of different – oh there’s a “bunch,” okay. A bunch of different metaphors which are culled – that’s “culled.” Okay. From all sorts of different physical realities. What I’m saying is if I actually come and make what you might say a scientific claim, you were sick. You were healed. God did it because you offered prayers in the right way and God saved you. I’m prepared to agree or disagree whether that’s factually true. If on the other hand I come and say, “Thank God. You’ve been preserved by God.” Right. I don’t think we need to purge that from our language.

HOLO: Or, as you’re arguing, from our conception of God.

MARMUR: Or from our conception of God. Last week in the cycle of reading from the Torah we read: “*Adonai ish milhamah, Adonai shemo.*” A terribly difficult image. “God is a man of war. God is his name.” So you have throughout Jewish tradition, because of the valance of the should, because this is part of our normative tradition there hasn’t been a willingness just to excise this. We’re not going to read it. It was censoring it. But there’s been constant attempts to do something with it. Back 2,000 years ago the sages of the midrash say, “Why does it say this? It can’t possibly mean that God is a man of war.” What it’s telling you is that when God appears as a hero of war and when God appears as an old man, or when God appears in one manifestation or another manifestation it’s still God. Actually, this is used in the ancient midrash to counter certain gnostic trends and other trends to say, you know, there are different deities in the world. No, it’s all one God.

HOLO: And the need of the Gnostics to parcel out these qualities into other Gods derives from the binary. The binary forces them to say if not A then it must be B.

MARMUR: Correct.

HOLO: Therefore, we have to account for that in another way in the midrash.

MARMUR: The midrash said no.

HOLO: God can englobe all of these.

MARMUR: I’ll give you another example, Abarvanel, Isaac Abarvanel, wonderful Spanish exegete. He offers – he’s very troubled by this expression, “God is a man of war.” So I’ll give you two of his fantastic ways of dealing with it. The first one is to say you need to understand what’s going on. Moses is talking to Pharaoh. And he says, “Adonai,” and then he looks up at Pharaoh and says, “*ish milhama.*” God. You man of war. God is his name. Man of war. Because it can’t possibly refer to God.

HOLO: So you put a comma and you make it...

MARMUR: So Abarvanel, the should is circumscribed by the can. He is forced to make this into a different metaphor. The other one is even better. And to explain, there's an apocryphal tale told about an HUC professor in Cincinnati. I promise you this is relevant. I will get there.

HOLO: We want the story anyway.

MARMUR: We'll get there in a minute. The apocryphal tale tells of a Talmud professor who used to play – there was a tennis court next to the campus. And there was a sign on the tennis court saying faculty and students only. No guests allowed. And one day a couple of students arrived at the court to play tennis and they saw the faculty member playing tennis with a guest. And they were upset. And they said, "Look, professor, we're very sorry but with the greatest possible respect there's a sign. It's pretty clear this is the policy." So he looked at them and he said, "Look, boys, I think I need to teach you how Jews read texts. What does the sign say? The sign says 'Faculty and students only? No. Guests allowed.'" So why do I mention this? This is what Abarvanel does with our difficult texts in Exodus. He says: "*Adonai ish milhama?*" Could it actually be that God is a man of war? No! *Adonai shemo!* No, this is God beyond all metaphor, beyond all human attempts to bound or express or to say anything, that's who we're talking about here. So time and again, I'll just give you one more example of this. There's a remarkable Orthodox rabbi, Rabbi Timrat, died in the early 1930s who was a pacifist, part of the Zionist movement. So what does a pacifist do with this verse? So he reads the verse to say the domain of war is for the divine not for the human. God is a man of war, not man.

HOLO: He's the man.

MARMUR: Right. Man or the hero for whatever *ish* means. But this verse proves for him that...

HOLO: War is only legitimate in God's domain.

MARMUR: Right. So what now? Again, looking from the outside this looks like a kind of pharisaic, pedantic, pedefogery, whatever word you want to use. You're just making it up as you go along. Actually I want to suggest this is something very profound, certainly within the Jewish tradition that rather than simply say, "I can't be doing with any of that, let's throw it out." The question for us should not be what does it mean. The question is what must it mean. What can it mean? How do I come to these terms and re-understand them in my current place?

HOLO: And in the confines of the conversation as you have laid it out, it makes perfect sense. I get it. I'm content to be wrong in your eyes for the record. But it doesn't really obviate the core, essentialist, binarist opposition to your position which is that must is really about each individual who feels the must. It's not about the God upon who they're reflecting. And hence, intrinsically either distant from or in fact a perversion of the absolute out there that the binarist, essentialist does want to put his or her thumb on, or finger on rather, specifically. So I get why your argument is self-contained and logical within the self-containment. But I don't see it frontally addressing the binarist position.

MARMUR: You haven't heard me say that everything can be elided into metaphor.

HOLO: Why am I talking to you?

MARMUR: And we can dodge everything. What I'm trying to say is we need to find ways of broadening the subtlety of this cause. And I'm not trying to make a clever argument here. And I think I'm succeeding in not making a clever argument. But what I'm trying to do is say there has to be a way out of that loop whereby there's only – I myself, when I say to you can, I also am saying cannot. There are certain kinds of statements which you might want to make about God. You know, God knows we live in a fundamentalist world where by some amazing coincidence there's only one possible thing that God could mean and they know it. I mean it's remarkable, right? What a stroke of luck? Everybody seems to have – you're speaking as God's personal PR spokesperson. So there are all kinds of statements that are made in that light which I reject, which I will not accept. And I'll be quite vigorous in arguing against. What I am not prepared to do, however, is therefore think that by rejecting them, okay, the conversation is ended. Liberal religionists enrage both sides of the God discussion, both the fundamentalists and the God delusion camp. There's a special place in hell for liberal religionists because we come over to them as those who want to have their cake and eat it too.

HOLO: Of course.

MARMUR: And I want to suggest, that's a good metaphor having your cake and eating it too, that actually that's what we do as human beings. And I want to say this one more – there's an idea that really has been occupying me about this God and language thing. There's a beautiful essay by a remarkable Jew of the 20th Century called Walther Benjamin. Benjamin is just a totally fascinating character. Benjamin wrote an essay on language and he says the following, "God creates the world through language." That's the story that we read. "Once human beings have been created, God passes on the language capacity to us. Our job in the world is to listen to what the world is saying." Benjamin has this notion of nature speaking. That language for him is not just about language systems and grammars and the vocabularies, but everything can be framed as speaking, as having language. Our jobs as human beings is to listen and then speak the world back to God. To speak God to God. Okay? I'm not doing justice to him but actually when you read Benjamin you realize he's much more confusing than just – he's not the most accessible guy you ever read but it's very, I think, beautiful and quite profound. And it resonates with these ideas that are swilling around in my head at the moment about what, thinking about language, may help us – how it may help us think about God. I love this idea. Rather than say "God is, God isn't," to say being attentive to the person sitting opposite me, to the world that I inhabit. I am doing God in some kind of a way rather than simply affirming or denying God.

HOLO: You're a characterization of liberal religion as being beholden to that task, in the process infuriating perhaps both sides of the argument. I'm content to leave it at that. And to top it off by having my cake and eating it too.

MARMUR: Oh, can I have some too.

HOLO: You know what? After this podcast we're going to share. Thank you very much for joining me. It's been a pleasure.

MARMUR: Thank you so much Joshua.

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