

This is a condensed, and slightly altered, version of an article written by the Dean of my Rabbinic School, Rabbi Bradley Artson. He writes about his journey after he learned that his son, Jacob, was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3. Jacob can communicate only through a flat image of a keyboard. He can't control his bodily movements and those who meet him would think that he had nothing to offer intellectually when quite the opposite is true. He has through his own and his family's intense work become an articulate scholar. He is currently writing a book with his father on disability in the Jewish community.

When my now 17 year old son, Jacob, was diagnosed with autism at the age of 3, I stopped putting on my tallit and tefillin. I had been taught that God was all-powerful, which would mean God could have prevented Jacob's autism but didn't. I could not pray to someone who could inflict autism (or choose not to prevent it). For a year and a half, God and I just didn't talk (which is a bit awkward professionally, because I am, after all, a rabbi).

I wrestled with tormenting thoughts: "I'm a good person; how could He do this? How could God let this happen to my beautiful, innocent son?"

If God didn't give Jacob his autism, doesn't cause suffering and evil, then what is the explanation?

The Torah begins with: "When God began creating heaven and earth, there was *tohu va-vohu* (chaos), and the *ruach* (wind/breath/spirit) of God was vibrating over the face of *tehom*, the deep, and God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light." We learn that there was void and emptiness, chaos, before God started creating. And we learn that the spirit, the breath of God fluttered over chaos. God took this chaos and created it into a cosmos with His *chesed* (his lovingkindness). He took his breath, the essence of life, breathed over the deep and our world was created. But this chaos still exists under the surface of our civilized world.

We about God's power as forcefulness. But it turns out throughout history that long-term power is not coercive; the most transformative power is persuasive. Think about the abiding impact of a really inspiring teacher. Reflect on how you have been transformed by a great mentor, or parent— people who broadened your vision, encouraged you and made it possible for you to do something you never thought possible. They were not coercive but invited you to be yourself.

After struggling with God for the last ten years, I now advocate what is called process thought. According to process thought, everything is in the process of becoming, and every process — you, me, the world, the cosmos, God — is not a substance, a thing, but rather a distinctive pattern of energy that retains some measure of constancy in the midst of change and growth. It is God who provides the grounds for our creativity, our becoming more connected, more just, more compassionate. It is God, working through Jacob, that allows Jacob to triumph over his autism day by day.

The external, bullying, punishing ideas of God melted, leaving the transformative, healing feeling of relationship, novelty and persuasion. God as a Creator is a continuing expression of loving, relating and of novelty.

In that sense, God is like the GPS system in my wife's car; I call its voice "Glynnis." When we drive, Glynnis routinely shows that it understands God better than I do. Glynnis and I will both say to my wife (the driver), "When you get to the stop sign, take a left." And then, Elana, for reasons neither Glynnis nor I comprehend, will drive to the stop sign and keep going straight. This is where Glynnis and I part ways. Because I want to blurt out, "What are you doing? I told you you were supposed to...! You're going to miss the exit!" But Glynnis simply says, "Recalibrating." Then it offers a corrective next choice: "At the next corner, take a right, then a right, then a right." Glynnis remains calm, unruffled and will recalibrate however often a driver makes a wrong choice.

I now know that God is like the GPS in that way. God doesn't judge or condemn us; God doesn't coerce us. God offers us the best possible choice at this moment. If we rise to God's lure, then God says, "Good — now here's the subsequent best choice." If we don't accept the lure, God says, "Recalibrating. OK, given your last choice, here's the best possible choice you can now make." Like Glynnis, God persistently invites us to make the best choice. That model of God invites us onto a path of compassion, justice and resilient strength that the bully in the sky image of God never could.

Instead of looking to God to be the all-powerful exception to the rules, I started looking to God as the One who inspires us to ever-new levels of love and creativity. I look for God in Jacob's refusal to let himself be defined or limited by his autism. I see God in Elana, my resilient and courageous wife, who refuses to abandon our son to a marginal existence. I see God's persistent lure in people in the community who look past the autistic label and embrace Jacob — a young man of hope, strength, joy and astonishing wisdom.

I don't think God gave my son autism or could have stopped it. Void and emptiness is always present. Creation is about containing the chaos, inviting order where there was none. The deep is always bubbling chaos, and God is steadily extending cosmos. But the void and emptiness remains real, innovative and dangerous. The deep continues to threaten and to beckon, bubbling over in crisis, tragedy and novelty alike.

That's from Rabbi Artson. And now from me ...It is this connection between the chaos which causes tragedy and novelty, deep grief and deep creativity that is confusing to most if not all of us. We want to control our world to make it work the way we want it to. But as Rabbi Artson so eloquently tells us, we can see God in both tragedy and creation. And sometimes we can even bring creation out of tragedy. It's not that we have to welcome the chaos but I agree with Rabbi Artson that we can see it as that which predated the order that we so strongly long for. May we learn to accept the chaos and bring whatever kind of creation we can from it.

Hag Sameach.

The whole article is found in the Los Angeles Jewish Journal  
[http://www.jewishjournal.com/shavuot/article/almighty\\_no\\_way\\_coming\\_to\\_know\\_the\\_god\\_we\\_already\\_love\\_20100511/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/shavuot/article/almighty_no_way_coming_to_know_the_god_we_already_love_20100511/)