

My friends, if you read my tweets this week you know that tonight I am giving my answers to the following questions: Does God talk to you? If so, what does God say to you?

During the course of this sermon you will hear three stories, but I will not make you wait until the end of the stories to learn how I would answer the question “Does God talk to me?” My answer is that I do not know if God has spoken to me. So if that’s the answer, where’s the sermon? The sermon is how I arrived at my present answer of “I don’t know” from where I started. Where did I start? That’s the point of the first story.

I used to speak to many Christian study groups. They ranged across many denominations of Christianity, and with no insult intended, they included a wide range of sophistication with regard to the people who made up the various groups. They had lots of questions about Judaism, and some of the groups were literally astounded at my

answers to their questions. For example, I remember being asked what I would say to a Christian who came to me and said that he had considered conversion to Judaism but decided to remain a Christian. What would I say to that fellow to convince him to convert to Judaism? You can probably guess my answer. I said that if the fellow's religious and spiritual needs were being met by Christianity, I would tell him that he made the correct decision not to convert. It was very hard for some of the more evangelical types to accept that actively converting Christians to Judaism is not something we try to do.

One night, a woman asked me not if God spoke to me, because she took that as a given. She wanted to know as a rabbi, what was it God said when He did speak to me? Again, she was stunned by my answer, which was that God had never spoken to me and I never expected God would speak to me. I asked her if God spoke to her and she said yes, so I asked for an example.

She told me she lived in a rural part of North Fort Myers, and that one day a car ran over a snake in front of her house. She admitted that she was afraid of snakes, but she believed that as a Christian, it was her duty to lay hands on the snake in an attempt to heal it. Reluctantly, she began to walk to the road to lay hands on the snake, but before she reached it, God spoke to her. God said, “Do not lay hands on the snake; it has no soul.” So she did not lay hands on the snake.

To me, what had happened was very clear. As respectfully as I could, I asked her if she thought it was possible that what she took as God speaking to her was in fact her own inner conflict about her fear of snakes, and that she had stopped herself from laying hands on it. She said she understood the question but no, it had not been her own thought, it had been God talking to her. We moved on to

another question, but that's where I began: God has not and will not speak to me.

Story number two is very brief. There was a news story in Fort Myers about a family who saved money for a down payment for a specially equipped van for their profoundly disabled child. Through some mishap, the down payment had been stolen or otherwise lost. I immediately felt a strong impulse telling me to help them. It felt different from me thinking that I should help them. I did not think it was God talking to me, but I definitely was aware that this was a unique experience for me. I sent a donation to help them, and I said to myself that although I did not think that God had spoken to me, I wondered if the experience I had just had was what Christians understood as God speaking to them. For many years, that was my belief. God does not speak to us, but sometimes we have experiences that some people take as God speaking to them. Please understand, however, that if you asked me at that point if

God speaks to people, my answer would not have been I do not know. It would have been no, God does not do that, although some people have experiences that they mistakenly attribute to God. That had been my thinking from the very beginning. What had changed is that now I knew what one of those experiences felt like.

Now for story number three. I am a huge fan of a steel string acoustic guitar fingerstyle player named Doyle Dykes. In my humble opinion, he is the best in the world. Doyle Dykes is a deeply religious man, and began his career as a minister. He felt that he was not fulfilling God's purpose for his life, so he became a professional musician. He still felt he was not fulfilling God's plan, so he combined his deep faith with his musical virtuosity.

Part of his professional life was putting on clinics for Taylor Guitars. He did this all over the world, and Taylor had plenty of clinics in Florida, but never a Doyle Dykes clinic. I

was home recuperating from injuries in an auto accident when I read that there was to be a Doyle Dykes clinic about four hours away from Fort Myers, and it was far enough in the future that I hoped I would be healed enough to go. I made my reservation, and I went.

The clinic was amazing, watching Doyle make the guitar sound like there were four or five guitars being played at once, not through electronic gimmickry, but through his amazing talent. He also talked to us, and at one point shared that he had recently had surgery for a brain tumor. He would live, but his balance was compromised, and worse for a professional musician, so was his hearing. Getting up and dressed each day was difficult. He had been going through a terribly hard time.

When the clinic was finished, Doyle stood around talking and signing autographs on pictures of himself that Taylor supplied to the attendees—these clinics are small groups

of about twenty people. I was one of a few waiting to say hello and get a picture signed. When it was my turn, I handed him my picture with left hand, and extended my right hand to shake his. He took my hand, and that's where this story gets weird.

The instant we clasped hands, I felt like I had been given an order. The order was "Bless him." I did not hear a voice—it was not a voice. I am more of a rationalist than I am a mystic. But as sure as I am standing here today, I can tell you that it came from outside of me. I can tell you that not for a second did my brain ponder the situation, nor did I consider what this was going to look like to all the people around us. I never thought about what Doyle would say or think. And I did not wonder how to bless him. The best way I can describe the order is that it seemed to be some sort of telepathy, and as soon as I perceived "Bless him," Hebrew was coming out of my mouth, the Hebrew from the threefold blessing in the Torah. I offered no explanation

to him, neither before or after, nor did I translate the words. I said them with my eyes closed. When I finished, I opened my eyes. We were still hand in hand, and Doyle was literally weeping. He let go of my hand and hugged me. While he hugged me, he whispered, "I received that. You gave me a blessing from God, and I received it."

To this day, I cannot explain what happened that night. Did God communicate with me that night? I want to believe so, but I cannot know for sure. So does God talk to me? I don't know, but I do know that my answer to that question can never again be that God has never spoken to me and never will.

I share this with you tonight in the hope of encouraging you to be open. Judaism is all about being open, being aware of the miracles of life that we take for granted. That's why we have a prayer to thank God that we are supposed to say after using the bathroom. Who thinks

about being able to go to the bathroom without a problem? Anyone who has been unable to do so probably does. Judaism wants us to be open to a higher level of awareness than the one at which we spend most of our time. Notice the amazing things that are built into our world and take a moment, not just to say that's a good thing, but to say that's a good thing that God created. Will God ever speak to you? I don't know, but I do know this. If you are not open and God speaks or communicates with you, you will simply talk yourself out of the possibility that God was the source. On the other hand, if God communicates with you and you are open to it, you may find it becomes one of the inexplicable mysteries you wonder about for the rest of your life on earth. I don't know if God commanded me to bless Doyle Dykes that April night in 2005, but I know that holy words moved a man who could not understand them to tears, and who somehow knew that the words were a blessing. I'll never know if that came to me from God, but just wondering

about it is one of the great blessings of my life. I wish you the same.