

The GOD Survey

Understanding God

It turns out, however, that when Sinai congregants use the word "God," they do not do so in classic Jewish terms.

For example, when asked about the traditional belief that God rewards good people and punishes bad people, 73.8% said that did not happen. When asked if God is all powerful, 39.5% said yes while 39.5% said no and 21% said they were unsure. And is God just? Although 26.3% say yes, 30.4% say they do not believe God is just and 43.4% are not sure.

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Defining God

How, then, do most Sinai congregants characterize God?

More than 70% of the congregation agreed with these four statements: "God is hope," "God is love," "Healing the sick is Godly," and "Feeding the hungry is Godly." Between half and two-thirds agreed that "There is purpose and design in the world," "We are partners with God in the ongoing process of creation," "There is one God," and "God is a presence in the universe supporting us to do our best." Taken together, these responses represent the survey's strongest affirmations of God.

Wrestling with Faith

For all this, congregants are also struggling with faith.

A notable 93.8% agreed with the statement that "Innocent people sometimes suffer without any reason." A majority of congregants said they felt distant from God when "seeing the devastation caused by natural disasters," "when seeing the state of the world in general," and especially "when a relative or friend encounters illness or personal loss."

And when the survey invited people to ask God their own questions, more than 200 congregants expressed concerns about justice, such as: "God, why do bad things happen to good people?" and "Why? Why? Why?"

Purpose on Earth

As people addressed questions to God, they also began to ponder the ultimate questions of existence and our purpose here on earth. They asked God, "What do you want me to do with my life?," "How can I find peace?," "What happens next—after I die?"

Two congregants wrote:

"I used to think about God much more in my 30s through my early 50s. Now it seems as though I've come to a state of comfort with my formulation about what God has meant to me at varying times and stages in my life, so right now I'm less perplexed and intrigued and simply more accepting that I am part of God's plan for this earth, that I have a specific task to do, and I may not even know when I've completed it. And, that seems to be OK for right now. In another decade or two that may or may not be such a reassuring position."

"As I have approached (and now passed) age 50, and the real sense of the limited number of days I have on this Earth, the sense of how to make life meaningful seems a more pressing question."

So what have I learned about my congregants' approach toward God?

I now know that those who wonder and question God are not alone. Large numbers of those surveyed make positive affirmations about God, but at least 15% say there is no God, and a sizeable minority (20%) see no purpose or design in the universe. Although slightly more than half believe that God is the creator of the universe, 28% disagree, and 21% are not sure.

