

Kol Nidre - Yom Kippur 5769
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God in our Mispacha

Avinu Malkeinu – Our Parent, our Sovereign. I've always been struck by these powerful words – especially “Avinu” our father; our parent. God is a part of our family and a significant member at that. However, we might feel that God is more like the distant cousin who we call on the occasional birthday or anniversary. The relationship may sometimes be strained by recent personal struggles where we felt abandoned by the love we so desperately needed or the relationship with God as our family member may feel empty as we question how well we know one another. Tonight, as we call out to Avinu Malkeinu, God who is a part of our family, we examine this relationship and ask, ‘how do we take responsibility of our personal relationship with God and ultimately, with our community? How are we a part of the brit, the covenant that defines this relationship and our future together?’

We want a religion that is relevant, accessible and spiritually nourishing. Each of us want to walk from services, not only during these High Holy Days, but throughout the entire year, feeling satisfied that we've aligned ourselves with God and our community. We want to feel good about being here and being a part of our community. But what are our stumbling blocks and how do we achieve this greater goal?

For some, God is powerful and omnipotent. However, this is challenged when situations turn away from the better and we question where was God? Why did God allow this to happen?

For some, God is the image of the All Mighty presented in early childhood. One did not question God's ways, rather, just accepted whatever fate may bring and go forward with that which has been prescribed. Everything is God's will.

For others, God is a compass, leading us in a direction or path and lending support in times of need, yet not providing us with answers to all of life's challenging questions.

And yet, for other's God is not found in the walls of the synagogue or institutions, rather, God is on the mountaintop, in the wind and the rain. God cannot be summoned to one particular place, rather, we must seek out God in the world around us.

And there are as many more definitions of God as there are people in this room. For some of us experience God in our own way and others may struggle with just trying to find that glimmer of the Divine Light.

Whatever our experiences, whatever our definitions, spiritual awareness involves the need to slow down and wake up to the world around us. We are challenged to connect with that which is greater than ourselves. What may be frustrating is that there will not be that one moment in which everything will be revealed. We can't just sit on the sidelines waiting for it to happen. Our moment with God may not come like the lightning and thunder the Israelites experienced at Sinai, rather, it may be the silent beating of a butterfly's wings that carry God's presence.

Take Nachshon for example. Here stood a man at the Sea of Reeds. The Israelites stood at the shore with two possibilities before them – enter the sea and possibly drown; wait by the sea and be returned to slavery in Egypt or be killed by Pharaoh’s army. The people looked about waiting for God’s intervention, but it was Nachshon who would not just stand idly by and wait. Nachshon went in search of God by entering the water. And God was revealed through Nachshon’s pursuit by opening the sea and allowing the Israelites to pass through to the safety of the shore that would lead them to Sinai.

Each of us have a little Nachshon inside of us, wanting to jump into the sea and explore what might happen, if just for a moment we believed. If just for a moment we took the responsibility upon ourselves to experience God and not claim that this job belonged to someone else. Sure, miraculous moments such as birth and healing are easy to credit our strong faith and partnership with God. Yet, when it is a little more challenging, such as death or tragedy, it seems easier to turn our back on God.

Last month, I had the privilege of participating on a clergy panel at a conference for Parents of Murdered Children. Talk about being in a humbling surrounding. There I sat, knowing that my children were safe, healthy and happy, and I was in a room with parents, siblings, and even children who’s loved ones were so tragically ripped from their lives. There I was, expected to share with them how God might be there to support them as they sought their new normal. I expected to find a room filled with those who wanted to yell out that God was not fair and that how can there even be a God after what they had experienced. I expected a very angry and frustrated room.

Instead, I sat in a room filled with those whose belief in God had been challenged yet redefined. I sat in a room with individuals who did not seek ways to blame God and hence, banish God from their lives, rather, I sat with individuals who strove to deepen their relationship with God and their religious community. Those who were angry were not angry with God, for they did not feel abandoned by God, rather, the anger was with their religious communities who abandoned them. It seemed that their religious communities felt abandoned by God because they did not know how to approach these people who lost so much in an instant.

There was so much that moved me that day, but one thing in particular was how each individual in that room took it upon themselves to step into the sea. Each person took on the responsibility of discovering what his or her personal relationship with God would be from that day forward. And none of them claimed that this would be easy. Far from it.

And here we sit today, many of us weighing the current financial situation in our country. There are many who are losing sleep because they are on a fixed income and this unstable economy calls into question how they will pay the bills next month. There are those of us who are sitting on the edge waiting each day to see how the 401K retirement plans are holding wondering if retirement will be an option any time soon. There are those of us who are not thinking about retirement, but are concerned about investments in the stock market that we hoped to use for our children’s college education. There is so much instability in these difficult financial times that we seek for that one morsel of stability - that as our relationship with God and our community.

Yet, in these unstable times, wrestling for a relationship with God and finding moments of awe takes effort and is not handed to us on a platter.

In our quest for a relationship with God, we seek moments of awe. Awe is defined as, a feeling of amazement and respect mixed with fear that is often coupled with a feeling of personal insignificance or powerlessness. Rabbi Jamie Korngold defines awe as, “arriving spiritually and emotionally in a place beyond internal chatter, a place beyond rationalization or explanation. A place where the only word is, wow.”[\[i\]](#)

Think about for a moment, what have been your awe moments? What have been those moments where there were no words to describe your experience? How have these moments connected you to the Divine?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught that there are three pathways to awe and to meeting the Divine. “There are three starting points of contemplation about God; three trails that lead to God. The first is the way of sensing the presence of God in the world, in things; the second is the way of sensing God’s presence in the Bible; the third is the way of sensing God’s presence in sacred deeds.”[\[ii\]](#)

It seems natural to seek God’s presence in the Bible and through acts of mitzvot. We do this every week as we struggle with the meaning of our text in Torah study or other educational experiences in which we wrestle with Jewish text. And we seek a closer relationship to God as we fulfill mitzvot, such as feeding the homeless, celebrating with B’nei Mitzvah students, and comforting the bereaved. But what challenges us even more is how we sense God in the world.

Rabbi Heschel wrote:

It is only when we suddenly come up against things obviously beyond the scope of human domination or jurisdiction, such as mountains or oceans, or uncontrollable events like sudden death, earthquakes or other catastrophes, that we are somewhat shaken out of our illusions [that we are in charge]. Confined in our own study rooms, we may entertain any idea that comes to our minds. Under such circumstances it is even plausible to say that the world is worthless and all meaning a dream or fiction. And yet, no one can sneer at the stars, mock the dawn, ridicule the outburst of spring, or scoff at the totality of being. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between heaven and earth, we are silenced.”[\[iii\]](#)

Try as we might, to reason all that is around us and find explanation for each moment, we realize, we can’t. That there is that which is beyond our control and all we can do is ride along with it.

In August, I experienced the biggest and longest earthquake since moving to California ten years ago. There was always a part of me wanting to know what that felt like, but while in the middle of it, there was the realization that I had absolutely no control. There was nothing I could do except make sure that I was out of the way of the wall unit behind my desk as it banged furiously against the wall. For me, that was a God moment.

I then went down to the preschool with my camel puppet, Gamalia, to check in on the kids. To my surprise, each of them were thrilled with the ride God provided that day. “Rabbi, did you feel that!” “Rabbi, that was so cool!” “Rabbi, God made the earth shake! Wow!”

Yeah, wow! They were right, it was awesome, and fortunately, we could experience it this way as we were lucky no one was hurt.

So, what makes our souls soar? What moves us to a place of confusion to a place of connection and peace with God, our family member? When do we make the time to notice the little and the big things that create these moments of awe? And how do we allow our souls to sing and our hearts to open to the relationship with God?

Every day we recite the Sh'ma which includes the V'ahavta. Within the v'ahavta are the every day tasks that we should engage in. From loving God with all our hearts and soul. To teaching the mitzvot to our children. Reading and rereading them again each day, whether we are at home or away, whether we are sitting or walking. Placing them on our bodies and on the doorposts to our homes. These words remind us that we are to seek out our relationship with God at every moment during our day and not segregate this relationship to one time or place.

Our relationship with God, as with any family member, does not only exist in the synagogue home, but rather, it exists at all times. Our relationship with God does not have to be confined to only the words in the prayer book. Our relationship with God does not only have to exist in holy tasks. Our relationship with God is in every place, in every word, and in everything we do, no matter how mundane. Our relationship with God is defined not by words found in a dictionary or “how-to” manual. Our relationship with God is defined by us.

How will you define and act upon your relationship with God this year? How will you strengthen the bonds of your familial relationship with God? Will God remain the distant cousin or will you welcome God to live with you in your home, in your space? Will you seek out to find God in even the smallest corner of your world?

When Jacob experienced God in the most remote part of the desert he said, “God was in this place, and I, I did not know it.”

God is in this place, God is in that place. Now is the time to discover God in your place - with you. Now is the time to experience that awe moment, hold on to it, and own it.

[i] Rabbi Jamie S. Korngold, *God in the Wilderness: Rediscovering the Spirituality of the Great Outdoors with the Adventure Rabbi* (Doubleday, New York: 2007).

[ii] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1955), p. 31.

[\[iii\]](#) Heschel, *Man is not Alone*, p. 290 and *God in Search of Man*, pp. 105-6.