

“Seeking Relationship with G-d”

*Yom Kippur 5771 * Sermon II of II
Rabbi Jay Perlman
Temple Beth Shalom, Needham, MA*

For those who engage in the spiritual search, the task of reaching towards transcendence can seem overwhelming. To help find the way, some turn to the wisdom of sacred texts. Others...to the observance of tradition. And others still, seek the advice of sage teachers and guides. Recently, however, I learned that a number of people have started to look in yet another – admittedly more modern – direction: Their iPhone. Specifically, a number of people have apparently started using a special application called “Note to G-d.” Created about a year ago, “Note to G-d” allows a user to privately write a personal note to G-d and then, through the miracle of cyberspace, send it – anonymously – out into the ether. And while all notes are stored away in a central data base, the user is invited to consider it as though G-d is reading each and every message. According to media reports on NBC, CBS, and others, “Note to G-d” became an instant hit as soon as it was made available. Indeed, we live in an age of 21st century technological innovation. And at such a time, perhaps it shouldn’t be so surprising that even when it comes to G-d, we are able to say: “There’s an app for that!”

Last week, on Rosh Hashanah, we started a conversation about G-d.

Inspired by our leadership’s discussion of our congregation’s new Vision Statement – and the careful – some might say even guarded - consideration of whether or not the word “G-d” should be included in the text, I invited us to bring the “G-d word” more out into the open so that we might thoughtfully discuss the meaning of belief and faith in our lives.

I spoke about how a struggle with G-d is an inherent part of being Jewish – that *Yisrael* implies ‘wrestling’ and how it is understandable that many in our community find it difficult to consider G-d as part of their lives given the many challenges to faith today.

And I shared how, historically, the very beginnings of reaching out to G-d were born thousands of years ago when human beings instinctively intuited that there was some Unifying Reality in the Universe....some inexplicable source of order and meaning....and that people wanted in some way, to align their lives with this Reality. All ancient traditions – including our own – recognized that this Source of All – given different names by different peoples - was beyond language... beyond imagination....and most certainly beyond comprehension.

And yet, despite this seemingly unbridgeable divide, people still sought some kind of spiritual and transcendent connection with this Reality – a **relationship**, if you will, that would somehow speak to their lives....that would inspire them in times of joy - offer comfort and hope in times of difficulty – and give direction and guidance in how to live thoughtfully, and compassionately.

Over the centuries and throughout the generations, people turned to the resources of the hand and the heart, the mind and the spirit to help them reach out. They wrote extraordinary stories, penned moving poetry and prayers, and composed the most beautiful music. In short, they crafted the ‘mythos’ of the people. And many of these

works ultimately were adopted as the sacred texts and essential elements of the developing religions of the world. Sages and scholars tell us that these writings – including the Torah – were never intended to be read literally. Rather, they were created so that they might point towards deeper and more sophisticated truths about G-d, the world, and life.

Neil Gillman, Professor of Theology at the Conservative Movement's Jewish Theological Seminary has noted that "our tradition provides us with a rich kaleidoscopic system of metaphors for G-d. We (accept) some of these, reject others, and add some of our own reflecting our own personal experience of G-d." Our most traditional metaphors are familiar ones – developed over thousands of years by people who drew from images closest to them and their lives. They spoke of G-d as Father and King...or Divine Parent and Ruler. They spoke of a Redeemer, Creator, Protector, Rock, Holy One, *Shechinah* – Hebrew for "The One Who Dwells," and particularly appropriate at this season: Judge. Each image is unique and was intended to offer a single facet of understanding of that which the rabbis knew to be infinite and beyond such language.

As part of Professor Gillman's theology classes at JTS, he asks his students to seriously consider and then try to describe their own relationship with G-d using a metaphor that is all their own. And, he tells them, the more personal the metaphor, the better it is. Gillman one time recalled that the most intriguing metaphor that he ever received in response to this assignment was submitted by a student who wrote that for her, G-d was Fred Astair to her Ginger Rogers. She explained: "When we miss a step, it's always my fault. He dances in flats; I have to dance in heels. He's on the ceiling, I'm on the floor; He can be late, I can't; He pinches me in the clinches, I mustn't. And Cyd Charisse is waiting for me to fail. But when we get it together – she concludes – it's sheer ecstasy.

Interestingly, in rabbinic tradition, there was far less concern about being able to define G-d's specific essence, than there was in inspiring people to be in relationship with G-d.

Indeed, I believe that through the liturgy of these very High Holy Days, we are invited to spiritually encounter G-d. Consider it: On Rosh Hashanah, the sound of the shofar that brings us together is an echo of great shofar blast that is said to have called the Children of Israel to G-d's presence at Mount Sinai. And then, on Yom Kippur afternoon – before the final *tekiah gedolah* – the final sounding of the shofar - the very last words of our liturgy have us affirm this relationship – with our uttering the sentence "*Adonai Hu HaElohim*" – "Adonai is G-d" – not once, but seven consecutive times.

In between these first and the final shofar blasts, if we look carefully, I believe we find that our tradition tries to offer us insight into where G-d might be experienced most profoundly in our lives and how we might come to form a relationship. These insights, I believe, are found, appropriately enough, in two of the Torah readings for this season.

On the second day of Rosh Hashanah, we are invited to read about creation, Genesis, chapter one: *B'reisheet bara...* "In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth." The text tells a story of the world's creation: light and darkness.....day and night....sun, moon, and stars.....trees, animals and, of course, humanity. It is through the reading of this text, I believe, that we are asked to consider the wonder of creation itself. And then, beyond this, to consider how our feelings of wonderment might enable us to encounter G-d.

The natural world moves us in ways that are hard to describe. Beyond any literal notion as to how mountains, oceans, and sunsets came to be, are the undeniable feelings that one experiences as we behold them: peace....awe...even reverence. Somehow, our natural world resonates deeply within us....inspiring us to pause....connecting us to something that we intimate is much greater than ourselves.

Our tradition gave voice to these feelings – reaching out, particularly through Psalms: “*Mah Rabu Ma’asecha Adonai....!*” - “How awesome is what you do, O G-d. You have made everything with wisdom. The earth is full of Your creations!” (Ps 104:24). And from Psalm 8: “O G-d, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth: When I behold Your heavens....the moon and the stars....(I marvel...)”

The great 20th century Jewish philosopher, Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote and spoke eloquently about how one’s relationship with G-d might emerge naturally from a life view that is inspired by awe. In Heschel’s words; “To pray is to take notice of the wonder – to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live” (*In Man’s Quest for G-d*).

But it is not only in the natural world where we experience wonder. It is through the most precious relationships in our lives. To share a relationship of love with another person....a soul-mate, a child, a parent, a sibling, a friend....is to experience first hand the very limitations of language. To say, “I love you” to that person, in a moment of meaning, is to express a depth of emotion that is simply beyond anything that any three words could possibly express.

George Steiner, the British essayist and author, has noted that “it is decisively the fact that language does have frontiers that gives proof to a transcendent presence in the fabric of the world. It is just because we can go no further, because speech so marvelously fails us, that we experience the certitude of a divine meaning surpassing and enfolding ours.”

Last week, soon after Rosh Hashanah, my family received the wonderful news from my brother-in-law, Josh, that my sister Gabby had delivered – thank G-d - a happy, healthy baby boy. Logan Brit Abrams will be celebrated with much joy tomorrow morning at his Brit Milah here at Beth Shalom. And, as a proud uncle, I was thrilled to be able to hold him during a hospital visit last week. “*Mah Rabu Ma’asecha Adonai....*” “How wondrous, O G-d, is creation and life....”

Rabbi Amy Eilberg, following the birth of her own daughter, offered these words in a sermon that she shared with her congregation. She said...

“I will never forget the first time I was able to (pray) after my child’s birth. When I was able to hold the (prayer book) in my hands once again, on the second Shabbat of my daughter’s life, I found myself reaching out to a different G-d than before.

I found myself talking not to an image of G-d as the G-d of law and command....I called out to G-d as the Giver of Life, the G-d of mothers and children...of love and care and nourishment, a G-d who would understand that there was sanctity in nursing and diaper changing and rocking and comforting as surely as there was sanctity in my encounter with the (prayer book).

That night – she concluded – for the first time in my life, I encountered a feminine image of G-d, who rejoiced in the birth of my daughter and my own rebirth as a mother. This is a gift that will be with me forever.”

The second High Holy Day portion that I believe helps us to spiritually encounter G-d is the portion that we will read be read this afternoon. The collection of specially selected verses from Leviticus, chapter nineteen is most commonly known as “the Holiness Code.” The text begins: “*K’doshim T’hiyu*”: You all shall become holy.” What follows then is a series of laws that the Israelites were to follow in order to do so.

Many of the commandments that are listed here are familiar: honor your parents – be fair in judging of others – care for the homeless and the hungry – and love your neighbor as yourself. Notably – a number of the specific mitzvot that are listed here are followed by the words: “*Ani Adonai*” - “I am Adonai.”

Rabbinic commentators pose the question as to why it was so important for G-d to state this repeatedly throughout the text. Answering their own question, they tell us that G-d intentionally added these words so that the people would never forget where these laws came from.

As we thoughtfully read Leviticus today we find many different kinds of laws. A number of these – including those that I just shared - would certainly hold to be true for all time. Others, however, we understand reflect the ancient time and culture from which they emerged. What is important, however is that we recognize that there are laws.....certain essential morals and values that we do believe are absolute. What makes them so is that they are somehow grounded in something absolute.

Scholar and teacher, Rabbi Harold Schulweis speaks often about G-d, faith, and morality. In one article, he comments on how he has noticed that, for his audiences, a connection with G-d comes more or less easily depending on how he frames the discussion. He writes: “I have noticed an interesting response to two different ways of formulating the G-d idea. In one form I ask, how many could subscribe to the belief that G-d is just, merciful and good; that it is He who lifts up the fallen, heals the sick and loosens the fetters of the bound? The question – he says – is generally met with reluctance, at best with agnostic reserve, and frequently with strong denial.”

“The other formulation,” – he continues – “asks how many would affirm that justice, mercy, and goodness are G-dly; that uplifting the fallen, healing the sick, and loosening the fetters of the bound are divine. Here, the response is largely positive and most often enthusiastic.”

Each year, the shofar sounds and invites us to explore our faith – to consider our relationship – our struggles, our strivings, even our dancing with G-d. The insights that we discover during these days are intended to challenge us and to inspire us....informing not only what we believe and don’t believe.....but, even more importantly, how we live.

For we know that deepening our capacity for wonder and awe has the ability to nurture within us the spirit of gratitude....and ultimately, that of humility. As well....living with and learning how we might apply ultimate values have the ability to nurture within us an

abiding sense of responsibility.....and then ultimately, a compassionate soul.....Taken together in forming a relationship with G-d, we are taught, these have the capacity to help us experience life more fully – to remind us of how meaningful our lives can be – to offer us hope in the face of adversity –and to reassure us that as we make our way through life, we are never alone.

I too wrestle in my relationship with G-d. Which is why I so look forward to our continuing this conversation. For from each other, we learn and we grow. And, hopefully, as we engage in this exploration together, with each passing *yontif*.....we will better come to know what we mean when we say:

Sh'ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Cain Y'hi Ratzon.....Be this G-d's will.

Amen.