

Before Barachu

Tonight instead of giving one sermon at the end of the service, I will be giving three smaller sermons placed strategically throughout the service. I promise this is not like a couple of part-time jobs that add up to more than one full-time job.

I offer the first now, right before the *Barachu*, the call to worship. What exactly does worship mean? In today's world, many like to say they are spiritual, not necessarily religious, but definitely spiritual. Many say they meditate; they don't pray or worship. This perspective raises the question of what it means to be spiritual in the year 2013? In *Risking Connection in the Faith Communities*, spirituality is defined as "our human need to connect with something beyond our human relationship and ourselves, our understanding of a larger framework of the world and our identity underlying our experience. It is the part of us that searches for meaning and purpose in our lives, inner wholeness and harmony."

As Dr. Ron Wolfson described, "When you see yourself and others and Gd as a thou, you open up yourself, to the possibility, that there is something beyond yourself, to the understanding that meaning is found in the ability to experience life as a dialogue, not a monologue, to rejecting selfishness as a limited narcissism and embracing relationship as your guiding existential principal of being." For some of us, that something beyond is called Gd; for others, the divine mystery; for still others, the sacred and holy.

Our prayer book, our *machzor*, is filled with Gd language. "Blessed are you O'Gd," "You/Gd are holy," and "You are the one who created peace above...." The examples are too numerous to list here. This Gd language is the biblical and rabbinical authors' attempt to describe the spiritual realm that connects us to the larger world.

Over time, the Jewish concept of Gd has changed. However, many of our prayers themselves still encapsulate our original concept of Gd; this foundational, traditional Gd, who is outside, above and beyond us, who knows all, sees all and ultimately metes out rewards and punishment. Yet many of us have rejected what Rabbi Bradley Artson describes as the "most common usage of Gd in the minds of most people—a bully in the sky." He continues, "In process thinking, Gd does not work through coercion;" In fact, how or when Gd works is often unknown, a perfect mystery. The question becomes -- what to do about this confusion, this ambiguity. After all, most of us like knowing!!!! Composer Allen Shawn wrote, "At the core of Judaism is the idea of the oneness of Gd and of the unknowability and unrepresentability of that oneness. It seems to me that a part of the meaning of Judaism is this abstract, this deep sense that we do not know! The not knowing is itself sacred."

And yet not knowing does not mean walking away or distancing oneself. It means entering into a dialogue without knowing how. It means acknowledging a spiritual world without being able to prove its existence. It means praying even when we do not know to whom or even why.

This is called Gd-wrestling in the literature. As Dr. Wolfson wrote, "Ironically the very word Yisrael has wrestling at its heart. Struggle or agree, defend or critique, what matters is to be in relationship with...." Gd wrestling acknowledges all the inescapable difficulties with faith and belief in Gd. It honors the questions, paradoxes and inconsistencies. It allows us to wrestle with Gd. For it is not "our role to solve Gd," as David Ebenbach wrote in *The Artists Torah*. He continues, "Our role is to hang out in that unknown, to be in dialogue with the divine mystery."

As we go through today's service, think about what gives your life meaning. What connects you to something outside yourself, bigger than yourself, or wiser than yourself?

## Before Silent Amidah

Before we have a moment of silence, I would like to offer the following *Kavannah* or intention. Throughout Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, we pray about change, *teshuvah*, repentance, turning, improving. We encourage people to look inside and face who they are and who they hope to become. I don't know about you, but sometimes I get lost in all of the possible ways I can improve-- there are so many. I can become overwhelmed, almost paralyzed. So for me, the task becomes discovering -- what is my goal this year. Not all my goals. I don't need to do everything, but I need one really good goal that I can achieve by next year. Hopefully, I will then be ready to move on to the next.

Many of you remember Nathan Sharansky, who was accused by the Russians of spying and spent years in solitary confinement before eventually immigrating to Israel. After prison, he wrote his autobiography *Fear No Evil*. When he entered prison, he composed a prayer that he recited every day until he was freed. "Dear Gd, enable me to live through this ordeal and get out of here and to get to Israel and to be reunited with my Avital there. And may I be enabled to do so in an honest and an upright way." Mr. Sharansky knew what he wanted; his goals were clearly defined. When he achieved them, he would know; they were quantifiable. How many of our goals are so clear, so well thought out?

Then there are the people who are so focused, year after year, that they know exactly what they want; and yet year after year, they are disappointed, because they do not succeed.

This parable adapted by Leo Tolstoy, describes a cobbler named Martin, who "despaired of life and yearned to see Gd." Year after year, he prayed to see Gd. One night, he dreamed he would see Gd the next day. He began his day on alert, ready to catch a glimpse of the Almighty, but he was distracted when he encountered the members of a needy family. They were cold and desperately in need of food and coats. Martin took them in and spent the day taking care of them. As he lay down to sleep, he realized he had forgotten to look for Gd. That night, in a new dream, a voice promised he would see Gd the next day. But the next day, the same thing happened; he was again distracted by people in need. During the third night, he apologized profusely to Gd and asked to die. As he dreamed, he saw a very long line of all the people he had helped throughout his life. As they passed, he heard a voice saying, "Martin, be assured you have seen Gd's face. It is in all the faces of all those whom you have helped."

Sometimes the answer is right there; if only we would let ourselves see it. We are taught this truth in an old Yiddish folktale that takes place in a small town that has a resident Rabbi, who is famous for his wisdom. Jews from miles around come to study with him. They challenge him with difficult questions for the pure joy of hearing his brilliant answers. And the people of the town take great pride in bragging of their resident sage. One student in the town grows very jealous of the Rabbi. "I am as smart as that old man, he thinks; I will come up with a question that he cannot answer. Then people will know I am wiser than he is." Every day the student brings a new question to the Rabbi, imagining that this time the question is too difficult to answer. Every day the student is disappointed as the Rabbi knows the answer. Finally, the young man develops the following plan. He catches a small bird and brings it to the Rabbi. He cups the little bird in the space between his two hands in such a way that the bird cannot be seen. "Rabbi," the young man asks, "in my hands I am holding a tiny bird. Tell me, is the bird alive or is it dead?" What a strange question. The people gather closer together, the better to hear the Rabbi's answer. But how would the Rabbi know? And the young man smirks. He is certain that the Rabbi cannot answer this question, because he has a clever plan. If the Rabbi replies that the bird is dead, then the boy will open his hands and the bird will fly away. If the Rabbi replies

that the bird is alive, the student will quickly crush the tiny bird with his palms, than open his hands and reveal a dead bird. For a while the Rabbi sits deep in thought. His eyes are closed and one hand plays with his beard. At last, he opens his eyes and looks at the young man. “My child, he says, “-In your hand, you are holding a life. Choose very carefully what you will do with it.”

Let us take the time now--tonight and tomorrow -- to choose carefully what we will do, for our lives are in our hands.

Before *viddui*, the confessionals

In a moment we will read what is called the *viddui*, the confessionals, the communal listing of sins. Rabbi Max Routtenberg, a renowned conservative Rabbi of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote, “If I had to reduce the essential meaning of the vast religious panorama of the High Holydays to just one word, I would select the word ‘responsibility.’ The ritual of these days-the prayers, the sounding of the shofar, the fasting, the confessionals -- is based on the belief that we are responsible for our actions, accountable for our deeds, and judged for the things we do or do not do.”

Through the ages, the Rabbis have asked, implored, and commanded us to repent, turn back, hit the mark. As they do they also know that the world was made with more than just judgment. According to the Kabbalists, judgment is balanced by compassion. Philo of Alexandria wrote, “Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a great battle.” That includes you!

In *Bereshit Rabbah* 12:15, the Rabbis asked, “Why are there two names for GD: Adonai and Eloheynu?” The answer was that Adonai reflects Gd’s mercy or compassion and Eloheynu reflects Gd’s justice. The Rabbis explained, “When Gd wished to create the world, Gd considered first what to do. If Gd made the world only with justice, than even when human beings sinned by mistake, Gd would be forced to punish them. But if Gd filled the world with mercy alone, human beings would never stop sinning, knowing that Gd would forgive them no matter what they did. So Gd wisely chose to use an equal measure of both compassion and justice, and thus the world survived.” May we too find that delicate balance between *din* and *rachmanis*, judgment and compassion. So we may also survive and thrive in the coming year. Please rise.