

Kol Nidre Sermon  
“Approaching God”  
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It was Shabbat somewhere between evening and morning -- 3:15 am to be exact. My alarm went off and I looked around the room confused. I saw a small crucifix hanging on the wall to my right and to my left was a wood carving of St. Agnes. I quickly got dressed and put on my Shabbat kippah. As I walked outside, I was greeted by the sounds of crickets and the darkest night sky illuminated by thousands of stars. I took a moment to look around and take in the beauty -- God is surely in this place and I DO know it. I made my way into the church for vigils, a communal praying of the psalms. As I entered I paused to take note of the large stained glass window of the Virgin Mary holding the baby Jesus. I began to feel uncomfortable. Why am I in a church in the middle of the night on Shabbat?

It's now 3:30 am and the monks make their way into the church. The sound of feet along the wood floorboards grows louder. One of the monks ascends to the prayer table in the middle of the room, he hits the table and they start to pray a familiar psalm. The words “God open my lips that my mouth may declare Your praise” comes forth from their mouths in a strange yet calming chant -- Gregorian chant. Two more times those words are repeated and now the monk community is ready to pray.

I feel a sense of familiarity with the words and yet the people surrounding me are not like me. I can't really tell you what happened next but I sat there for 45 minutes soaking in the sounds of sacred words. When vigils concluded one of the monks made his way to the front of the church and we were splashed with holy water. The water droplets flew across the room and hit me unexpectedly. I was a stranger in a strange land and I immediately felt vulnerable.

For the next day and a half, I immersed myself in the monastic lifestyle as a retreatant at Saint Joseph's Abbey in Spencer Massachusetts, a Trappist monastery. I found opportunities to approach God while being strengthened by that cloistered Catholic community. The vulnerability that I felt in the early hours of the morning after suddenly being splashed by holy water remained with me. Yet it is that vulnerability that continues to strengthen my faith today.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks teaches “Faith is the ability to rejoice in the midst of change and instability, traveling through the wilderness of time towards an unknown destination.”<sup>1</sup> Today on Yom Kippur, as we face our own mortality, we become vulnerable before God as we seek to find God.

This vulnerability is a blessing, one that we can learn to embrace. Who among us has not felt the loneliness of vulnerability - the feeling of no one to share our dreams with, and the challenges to others that went unheard? Yes it is true; vulnerability is often seen as something negative. But in light of our Jewish past when we journeyed through the great unknown to find God, perhaps we can begin to see vulnerability as being true to our authentic selves. We have the ability to be truly joyful and responsive to the words of our faith, only when we are vulnerable enough to see the Divine in each other and all around us.

Each time I enter the synagogue of my youth the words “*Da lifnei mi atah omed* – Know Before Whom You Stand” shine down upon me from above the *Aron Kodesh* – Holy Ark. Although this phrase from Rabbinic literature is inscribed on countless sanctuaries, can we ever truly understand what these words express? How can we begin to find and stand vulnerably before God?

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.rabbisacks.org/festival-insecurity-message-sukkot/>

Our biblical ancestors were constantly charged with the task of approaching challenging situations and yet the transformative verb “*vayigash* – he approached” is only found three times in the Torah. Abraham boldly approaches God when he learns that Sodom and Gemorah are going to be destroyed (Genesis 18:23). Elijah approaches God in a confrontation on Mount Carmel with the false prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:36-37). Finally Judah mercifully approaches his brother Joseph (*Vayigash eilav Yehudah*) and pleads for the release of their brother Benjamin (Genesis 44:18). Each time the biblical writer employs the word *vayigash*, a prayer is uttered and lives are charged. These prayerful *vayigash* moments helped our biblical ancestors approach difficult situations and they can help us learn how to enter into a relationship with the Divine.

As a rabbi, my search for God is somewhat of a regular occurrence. In the morning, wrapped in my *tallis* and *t’fillin*, I pray the words “*Elohai n’shamah shenatata bi t’horah hi*” just as we will do together tomorrow morning. By saying those words I, along with countless other Jews, acknowledge that God ultimately created my pure soul. It is God who breathed it into me and it is God who sustains it. Each day that my soul is within me I will praise and thank God. This prayer is not one-sided and speaks directly to a partnership between the Jewish people and God. I ultimately put my trust in God when I go to bed and pray that when I wake up God will return my soul to me as He did when I was first born. My search for God begins by approaching Him from the time I wake up in the morning until the time I go to bed at night.

Since one of the primary ways we connect with God is through prayer, I would like to speak about the importance of creating and fostering a life of prayer. The idea of prayer raises many questions. What does it mean to pray? Can I pray in my own way or must I use the words of the tradition? Does God hear us? Does God answer our prayers? In defining what prayer is we can find ways for prayer to be meaningful and worthwhile.

I want to share with you a letter on the importance prayer that was included in a mailing from the Jewish Theological Seminary a number of years ago:

“Will you say a prayer for me? I’m not religious. I don’t know the prayers. I’d feel hypocritical. I can’t get into ritual. I’m not sure what I believe, so how can I pray?

Would you say, ‘Since I’m not Einstein, I won’t think.’ Or ‘Since I’m not Michael Jordan, I won’t move?’ You are who you are, and whatever prayer may mean to you, it’s real and probably the most honest thing you do...

We Jews, for example, have a blessing for everything – for sighting a rainbow or the ocean, for our food, for beginnings and endings, even for lightning. Saying a blessing is a reminder: *Wait, look at this. Someone gave us this world. Stop a minute in wonder.*

Those blessings were written by people who did stop in wonder. And if you look for it, you may find that there is a voice for you among them. You may also find that somewhere in the prayer book are your fears and your dreams – and a way to express them.

Yes, there are risks in prayer. You can feel foolish, or hypocritical, or – worse – empty. This is a conversation in which there is no certainty of response.

But at the very least you put yourself in touch with who you are and what you could be. You are asking the oldest, best questions in the world: *Are*

*You there [God]? Do You care about me? What do You expect of me?*

The answers may be in the asking.

Start small. Bless one moment for what it brings you. Say one ancient prayer, link yourself with continuity and eternity. Fill one silence with your end of the conversation. No one can do this for you; it belongs to you.”<sup>2</sup>

Let’s start that conversation with God tonight. Find a prayer that calls out to you, or hold on to a word that is meaningful to you. Make that prayer or that word part of your personal conversation with God. In the year to come I challenge each of us to continue the conversations that we begin tonight. May God not be just part of our dusty High Holy Day prayer book that we open once a year, but part of our lives each day.

Finally let’s resolve to God watch. Whether it’s coming to pray more than twice a year, becoming more active here at Hillel, praying from the prayer book, or writing your own personal prayers, may we make sure to notice the various identifiable features, characteristics, movements, and gestures of God each day. Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, a great Chassidic teacher, once asked his students, “Where does God dwell?” The students answered, “God lives everywhere.” Reb Mendel was not satisfied with their answer. While it may be true that God lives everywhere, he taught, “God dwells wherever people let Him in.” May we let God in and invite Him to stay for the rest of our lives.

Standing before God, letting God in, listening to Him, all the obligations, I know many of you are saying to yourself this is not for me and what does this have to do with Yom Kippur? To

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<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins, *Rosh Hashanah Readings*, 48-49.

that all I can say is everything! We enter this space on Yom Kippur ready to pour out our heart. As we ask God to seal us in the Book of Life, God asks us to ask ourselves what our strengths and weaknesses are. It is as if He begs us to be open to all of the opportunities this New Year presents, and to be mindful of all the stumbling blocks that may come our way. We are not just standing before the Eternal our God; God is standing before us.

I want to conclude tonight with a fascinating newspaper report entitled “God Hinting At Retirement”

“At a press conference Tuesday, God Almighty, our Lord..., gave his strongest indication yet that he might soon step down from his post as the supreme ruler of all things...

‘I’ve been at this a long time,’ said God, ∞, the all-knowing, all-powerful being who has presided over the cosmos since forming it from sheer nothingness... ‘And the truth is, this was never something I planned on doing forever. Lately, in fact, I’ve begun to wonder if I should move on sooner rather than later...’

While touting his accomplishments as the prime mover of all space and time, the Lord spoke with surprising candor about the recent struggles of his absolute dominion over heaven and earth, acknowledging that it hasn’t always been easy for him to keep up with the rapid pace of modern existence.

‘I couldn’t be more proud of the universe I brought forth,’ God said. ‘But a lot has changed since then, and if I’m completely honest with myself, I’m probably not as passionate

about my work as I once was. Things change. Who knows? I might not be the right entity for this job, going forward...

Attempting to downplay such concerns, God told reporters that he wasn't 'going anywhere just yet' and that, in any case, the universe was largely self-sustaining these days.

'This place pretty much runs itself by now,' the Lord said. 'And besides, how many people still notice I'm around? To be frank, I'm not even sure I'm much more than a beloved figurehead at this point.'<sup>3</sup>

This article, published in the satirical news publication *The Onion*, while humorous, tells us something important about our Jewish belief in God and our ability to connect to the divine. Can God ever truly retire?

As a Hillel rabbi, I see students journey between sorrow and happiness. Sorrow may be breaking up with a first love or failing a class. Happiness may be getting the coveted internship or getting into graduate school. Each of these highs and lows undoubtedly make students feel vulnerable and sometimes very alone. But as the rabbi one of my main responsibilities is to nurture their souls, to listen to their dreams, to hear their challenges, and respond to their calls for help. Even at times of change and instability, our young adults need find new and creative ways to approach God.

Although God is central to all of Jewish life in one way or another, we often neglect to talk about what we mean when we say "God." It is easier, in fact, to reject the notion of God's existence, citing conceptions of God that do not seem meaningful or plausible. So tonight we

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theonion.com/article/god-hinting-at-retirement-17747>

will speak about God. We will seek to create an understanding of God that we can relate to and one we turn to and depend on in times of need.

For our ancestors, their *vayigash* moments helped them prayerfully approach God. My *vayigash* moment encouraged me to vulnerably seek God in unlikely places. Together may our souls be nourished and energized by the uncertainty of what the future holds. May the year 5777 to be the year in which we begin to talk about God, and enter into a relationship with God. Lord, give us the strength to be vulnerable when approaching You. Please help us to open our lips so our mouths can declare Your praise in joy. Only then will we truly know before whom we stand.<sup>4</sup>

*L'shanah Tova teichateimu* – May you all be sealed for a good year!

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<sup>4</sup> This sermon is based on a *D'var Torah* written for a forthcoming publication from Hofstra University Hillel