

October 5, 2019 – ו' תשרי תש"פ
Shabbat Shuvah Derashah
HIR – The Bayit
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Anu V'Atah: Expanding Our Relationships With God

I.

B'ahavah rabbah u'v'todah rabbah – with great love and great gratitude:

This derashah studies a central tefillah that we will repeat in every service of Yom Kippur.

But it's not only about that tefillah.

It's about us, in some way it is about me, and it is about God.

And because Biblical teshuvah is always about returning to God, as in ושבתי עד ה' א-להיך (and you shall return to the Lord your God) in the Parashat Hateshuvah, Chapter 30 in Devarim which we read last Shabbat; or as in שובה ישראל עד ה' א-להיך (return, O Israel, to the Lord your God), from this morning's haftarah; or as in וידעת היום והשבת אל לבבך כי ה' הוא הא-להים (know today, and restore unto your heart that the Lord is God), from the last line of the first paragraph of Aleinu which we sang as the opening to Malkhuyot on Rosh Hashanah; this this talk, too, is about teshuvah. Revisiting, reconsidering, our relationship with God.

It asks the hard questions I have heard you ask, and felt in my soul and heart because of you and because of the world we live in and from my own life.

And it offers answers which are wholly incomplete and yet answers still, answers which unabashedly sit alongside the questions, tempering them, softening them, just coexisting with them, offering their own strength and possibility.

And so I begin with this tefillah:

יהיו לרצון אמרי פי והגיון לבי לפניך ה' צורי וגואלי

May my mouth's speech, and my heart's expression, find Your favor, God, My Rock and My Redeemer.

II.

Unetaneh Tokef – that most magical, majestic and powerful prayer which sets the entire tone of Rosh Hashanah. It’s there in SOURCE 1, but we don’t even need to read it. The phrases leap off the page, they move something in us, something ineffable.

1. <i>Unetaneh Tokef - High Holiday Mussaf</i>	ונתנה תקף – תפילת מוסף לימים נוראים
<p>We lend power to the holiness of this day. For it is tremendous and awe filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted, your throne will be established in loving-kindness, and you sit on that throne in truth.</p>	<p>וּנְתַנֶּה תִּקְוָה קְדוּשַׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאִים וְבוֹ תִּנְשֵׂא מַלְכוּתְךָ וְיִכּוֹן בְּחֹסֶד כְּסָאָךָ וְתִשָּׁב עָלָיו בְּאַמֶּת.</p>
<p>It is true that you are the one who judges, and reproves, who knows all, and bears witness, who inscribes, seals, reckons and counts. You remember all that is forgotten. You open the book of records, and from it, all shall be read. In it lies each person's insignia.</p>	<p>אָמֵת כִּי אַתָּה הוּא דִּין וּמוֹכִיחַ וְיֹדֵעַ וְעַד וְכוֹתֵב וְחוֹתֵם וְסוֹפֵר וּמוֹנֶה וְתִזְכֹּר כָּל הַנְּשָׁכחוֹת וְתִפְתַּח אֶת סֵפֶר הַזְּכוֹרוֹנוֹת וּיִמְאֲלוּ יְקָרָא וְחוֹתֵם יָד כָּל אָדָם בּוֹ.</p>
<p>And a great shofar it is sounded, and a thin silent voice is heard. And the angels shall be alarmed, and dread and fear shall seize them as they proclaim: behold! the Day of Judgment on which the hosts of heaven shall be judged, for they too shall not be judged blameless by you, and all creatures shall parade before you as a herd of sheep. As a shepherd herds his flock, directing his sheep to pass under his staff, so do you pass, count, and record the souls of all living, and decree a limit to each one's days, and inscribe their final judgment.</p>	<p>וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע וְקוֹל דְּמָמָה דְּקָה יִשְׁמַע וּמִלְאָכִים יִחַפְזוּן וְחִיל וְרַעְדָה יִאֲחִזּוּן וְיִאֲמְרוּ הִנֵּה יוֹם הַדִּין לְפָקֵד עַל צָבָא מְרוֹם בְּדִין כִּי לֹא יִזְכוּ בְּעֵינֶיךָ בְּדִין וְכָל בְּאֵי עוֹלָם יַעֲבְרוּן לְפָנֶיךָ כְּבָנֵי מְרוֹן כְּבִקְרַת רוּעָה עֹדְרוּ מֵעֵבִיר צֹאנוּ תַּחַת שְׂבָטוֹ כֵּן תַּעֲבִיר וְתִסְפֹּר וְתִמְנֶה וְתִפְקֹד נַפְשׁ כָּל חַי וְתַחֲתֶיךָ קִצְבָה לְכָל בְּרִיָּה וְתִכְתֹּב אֶת גְּזֵר דְּיָנָם.</p>

הוא נורא ואיום ובו תנשא מלכותך – it is tremendous and awe-filled, and on it your kingship will be exalted.

אמת כי אתה הוא דין ומוכיח – It is true that you are the one who judges and reproves.

כי לא יזכו בעיניך בדין – for one cannot emerge meritorious in front of you in judgment.

The drama, the energy, the power, of Rosh Hashanah feeds off of this prayer, which is of course inspired to begin with *by* the power of Rosh Hashanah. And it depicts that most majestic, exalted and extraordinary God, and at its best it inspires us to introspect and be our best selves and resolve to grow and stretch and improve in the year ahead, just from the power of that tefillah and the God it describes, who in some way I *feel* when we are all plugged into the tefillah together, standing, eyes closed, upstairs or downstairs or wherever we are davening, and bringing ourselves fully into the moment.

That's real. It's real for me. It's part of my relationship with God.

And equally real are the struggles Unetaneh Tokef raises. Often whispered struggles, but they shouldn't be whispered, which is why I want to say them out loud here.

They are the struggles you share when we sit together in Elul, checking in and looking ahead to the coming Yamim Noraim.

You say: My cherished loved one who was here last Rosh Hashanah and died this year – were they judged by God last Rosh Hashanah to die? For what? How can I daven to that Judge? How am I supposed to come to shul and face that judge? Sure, I can step out for Unetaneh Tokef, but how can I even quite accept God as King this Rosh Hashanah? Good things, even great things, happened, too, this year, but they can't eliminate the pain that he, that she is no longer here with us to experience those good things, for they were taken away too soon.

And you say: God remembered Sarah and Chanah, as we read on Rosh Hashanah. When will God remember me? How can it be that I am praying this Rosh Hashanah for the same thing I was praying for last Rosh Hashanah – a healthy baby? Why did I have to go through a year of pregnancy loss and now I am still not pregnant? You ask, when it is written, במה יבראון, who will be created, why am I not chosen to create new life? Was it something I did? Is God punishing me for not being the best person I can be, for something specific? Do I want to believe in, to daven to, that God? I do want to, so much, believe and pray, but how can I?

And you say: This past year was a year of constant anxiety – about parnassah, livelihood, about feeding my family; self-doubt about how I can emotionally support those close to me who are struggling socially, emotionally. When it says, מי ישקט ומי יטרף, who will have a quiet calm year, and who will feel driven crazy, I feel I am in the latter category, even with all the blessings in my life. Why have I been so burdened with fears and anxieties? How, again, can I daven to that God, whose help I so desperately need, but who I feel abandoned me?

And I feel all those things with you.

The questions are not so much those unanswerable questions of *why* bad things happen, *why* people suffer. Philosophers, theologians, and regular plain folks like me have failed to answer these questions

since the beginning of human reflection on the divine. If I know anything, I know I don't have the answer to those questions.

The questions are about how to understand and think about an all-powerful King or God, such as the one described in Unetaneh Tokef. How to relate to that God altogether, how to connect with God in our lives.

And there are more questions, once we begin to ask. Questions asked not from criticism or from judgment, but from the desire to make sense of it all, to hold together all the things we value:

How to imagine a God that created the whole world but also, in some way, chose one nation for a special relationship? Called out to their forbears and was directly invested in the formation of their family, and then the nation, performing miracles for them and freeing them, freeing us, from slavery?

How to imagine that a God who is all-knowing and all-powerful decided to write a book, just one book, and that book actually is the Torah scroll that rests in this ark?

And while I don't know what each of your questions are, I do know that in the first real data set we have about the self-identifying Modern and Open Orthodox communities, from the study published by Nishma in 2017, we see that fully 1/4 of Modern Orthodox Jews do not tend to believe that God is involved in their day to day lives. Over 1/3 do not fully believe that God gave the written Torah to the Jewish people, through Moshe, at Mt. Sinai.

III.

What does it feel like to ask, and sit with, these questions?

For me, it surfaces so many feelings. I feel like a small child, grasping for understanding, for a foothold on some idea that seems too complicated for me to get my hands around. And as a rabbi offering spiritual guidance to people at some of life's most important and also most challenging moments, I sometimes feel a knot of worry in my stomach – what if I give the wrong answer?

What do we need God to be for us in these moments, and am I helping connect us to that conception of God?

And in a part of my theology that I reject, and yet its persistence teaches me so much about what shapes us beyond our control and what we have to contend with in ourselves, I also experience the fear that if I don't describe God in a frum enough way, that maybe God will punish me.

Sometimes it's better, certainly easier, to talk the God talk and walk the God walk but not ask the God questions.

But I fervently believe that prayer, and life, do, and should provoke those questions, as so often happens in Elul and Tishrei. If we feel them, and we don't ask them, at least sometimes, I believe we are shortchanging our relationship with God and with ourselves.

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In some way this cascade of questions begins with Unetaneh Tokef.

*So what I want to do in the time ahead, holding all these questions, holding Unetaneh Tokef, is to look at an alternative model, perhaps a counterpart model, from the High Holiday tefillah, the Ki Anu Amekha, that I think tries to respond to some of these questions. I want to talk about what that counterpart model means to me and where it can lead us, in its content and its framework, its structure, and what it opens up for us in our relationship with God. **I want to focus on three areas: expanding our models of our relationship with God, the dynamic of our one-to-one relationship with God, and finally, briefly, the place of community in this relationship.***

And because I think so much of the theological challenge can manifest in tefillah, I hope to share along the way some texts, ideas and approaches that can bring us into tefillah even with our questions in hand and in heart.

Let me set the scene for this other model, this other tefillah.

If the heart of Rosh Hashanah is coronating God as King, the heart of Yom Kippur – in the Temple and in the beit kenesset, in tefillah – is the viduy, the confession. It's acknowledging our wrongdoings as the beginning of setting ourselves on a better path for the year ahead.

To whom do we want to confess our missteps? Can you imagine confessing to a King? Even a merciful king who passes every subject under their gaze like a shepherd with their sheep. Still, a king barely

knows you, and has all the punishing force of the kingdom at their disposal, even if they also have the royal pardon. It's scary. Do you want to tell a king what you did wrong?

IV.

It's into this space, in the moment of leading into the collective viduy, the Ashamnu, in every single Yom Kippur service, that the tefillah of Ki Anu Amekha emerges, in SOURCE 2.

The power of this tefillah, which is, for me, one of the absolute high points of each Yom Kippur tefillah, is in its simplicity, its brevity, and its breadth. Let's sing it one time through and take in the words, the pairings, as we go, and then we can return to dissect it and where it comes from and try to understand what role it can play in our theology.

[SING]

2. <i>Ki Anu Amecha - Yom Kippur Machzor</i>	כי אנו עמך – מחזור ליום כפור
<p>Our God, and God of our fathers! Pardon us, forgive us, atone for us.</p> <p>For We are your nation; and You are our King. We are Your children; and You are our Father. We are Your servants; and You are our Master. We are Your congregation; and You are our Portion. We are Your inheritance; and You are our Destiny. We are Your flock; and You are our Shepherd. We are Your vineyard; and You are our Keeper. We are Your work; and You are our Creator. We are Your dear ones and You are our Beloved. We are Your treasure; and You are our God. We are Your people; and You are our King. We are Your distinguished ones; and You are our Distinguished One.</p> <p>We are brazen-faced; and You are merciful and gracious. We are stiff-necked; and You are slow to anger. We are full of iniquity; and You are full of compassion. Our days are like a passing shadow; and You are the same and Your years will not end.</p>	<p>אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ וְאֱ-לֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ סָלַח לָנוּ, מָחַל לָנוּ, כִּפֵּר לָנוּ.</p> <p>כִּי אָנוּ עַמְּךָ וְאַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ אָנוּ בְנֶיךָ וְאַתָּה אָבִינוּ אָנוּ עַבְדֶיךָ וְאַתָּה אֲדוֹנֵנוּ אָנוּ קְהֵלְךָ וְאַתָּה חֵלְקֵנוּ אָנוּ נִחְלֶתְךָ וְאַתָּה גּוֹרְלֵנוּ אָנוּ צֹאנְךָ וְאַתָּה רוֹעֵנוּ אָנוּ כְרֶמֶךָ וְאַתָּה נוֹטְרֵנוּ אָנוּ פְעֻלֶתְךָ וְאַתָּה יוֹצְרֵנוּ אָנוּ רְעִיתְךָ וְאַתָּה דוֹדֵנוּ אָנוּ סִגְלֶתְךָ וְאַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ אָנוּ עַמְּךָ וְאַתָּה מְלֻכֵנוּ אָנוּ מְאֻמִּירֶיךָ וְאַתָּה מְאֻמִּירֵנוּ.</p> <p>אָנוּ עֲזֵי פָנִים וְאַתָּה רַחוּם וְחַנּוּן אָנוּ קָשִׁי עֲרָף וְאַתָּה אָרֶךְ אַפַּיִם אָנוּ מְלֵאֵי עוֹן וְאַתָּה מְלֵא רַחֲמִים אָנוּ יְמֵינוּ כְּצֶל עוֹבֵר וְאַתָּה הוּא וְשָׁנוֹתֶיךָ לֹא יִתְמוּ.</p>

A few things jump out at me immediately.

First, there appears to be radical disorder. What is the organizing principle of this poem? So many short piyyutim, liturgical poems, like this follow an alphabetical arrangement, or even an incomplete alphabetical arrangement. Atah (א) Avinu, Anu (ב) Banekha, Atah (ג) Gedulateinu, or something like that.

This one feels completely random.

Maybe it's not alphabetical because it's following some kind of logical order which was more important than the aesthetic? But it's hard to find anything. It doesn't seem to go from greater power differential to less, or vice versa. We have lovers in the fourth to last line, and then we revert to nation and king in the last line. It's not quite chiastic, with the outer sections matching and the inner sections matching, although there are lots of more nature-y, earth-y lines in the middle.

Is it perhaps a scatterplot of ideas because it is unrealistic or unreasonable to expect our relationship with God, in the end of the day, to be neat, orderly and alphabetical? I can only wonder. I know my relationship with God often feels like that scatterplot.

So many things at once.

God as נוטרנו, our protector, after just missing a moment of potential sanger and feeling relieved and safe.

God as רעיִתנו, our lover, singing Lekha Dodi on Friday night here, and truly feeling that we are here loving God together.

And then, stretches of vacancy, of emptiness, at best sensing מלכנו, God as some distant King of the universe out there.

But can it be all of these things? Don't they contradict each other? Your parent can't be your lover, and the vineyard watchmen is not likely to be the king.

The best answer I can offer to that is the words of Walt Whitman, who in some sense speaks a profound religious truth in a very few words. Something that defies logic, but not God. It's his words in SOURCE 3:

3. Walt Whitman (19th c America) “Song of Myself, Part 51”

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

If it is true of the human, made in the image of God, how much the more so must it be true of the human in relationship with God.

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Now what this piyyut introduces – all the metaphors for our relationship with God – is not in any way new. The Bible is replete with all these descriptions, as we will see in the source this piyyut is based on. Different ones for different times and situations.

What is more unique about this piyyut is that it throws them together all at once, creating this multitude in one place, forcing us to think about how they coincide and interplay and what they mean in relationship to one another, and whether God could be all of them at once.

The authorship and dating of this amazing piyyut are not known. But, as we will see, this concept, this model of a multi-metaphor God relationship does not begin with the paytan, the author of this poem. This very piyyut has its roots in a Midrash from Shir Hashirim Rabbah, on the pasuk in Shir Hashirim Chapter 2 Verse 16 that states, הרעה בשושנים, דודי לי ואני לו, My beloved is to me, and I am his, who browses among the lilies.

The midrash sees the reciprocity of relationship, that each lover is something to the other, and, as the Rabbis always do, imagining this as allegory for the relationship between the children of Israel and God, fills in the specifics of that relationship.

In SOURCE 4, let’s look at the first half of that midrash.

4. Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:16	שיר השירים רבה ב/טז
“My beloved is mine and I am his”. <u>God is my God and I am God’s nation</u> . God is my God, - <i>I am the Lord thy God</i> (Exodus 20:2). I am God’s people and nation, as it says, <i>Attend unto Me, O My people, and give ear unto Me, O My nation</i> (Isaiah 51:4).	דודי לי ואני לו, הוא לי לא-להים, ואני לו לאמה. הוא לי לא-להים (שמות כ, ב): אנכי ה' א-להיך, ואני לו לעם ואמה, שנאמר (ישעיה נא, ד): הקשיבו אלי עמי ולאומי אלי האזינו.

<p><u>God is as a father to me, and I am as a son to God.</u> God is as a father to me: <i>For You are our Father</i> (Isaiah 63:16); also, <i>For I am become a father to Israel</i> (Jeremiah 31:9). I am as a son for God - <i>Israel is My son, My firstborn.</i> (Exodus 4:22), and again, <i>Ye are the children of the Lord</i> (Deuteronomy 14:1).</p> <p><u>God is as a shepherd to me</u> – <i>Give ear, O shepherd of Israel. I am to God a flock</i> – <i>And ye, My sheep, the sheep of My pasture</i> (Ezek 34, 31).</p> <p><u>God is to me as a keeper</u> – <i>Behold, One that keepeth Israel doth neither slumber no sleep</i> (Psalms 121:4). <u>I am God's vineyard</u>, as it says, <i>For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel</i> (Isaiah 5:7).</p>	<p>הוא לי לאב, ואני לו לבן. הוא לי לאב (ישעיה סג, טז): כי אתה אבינו, (ירמיה לא, ח): כי הייתי לישראל לאב, ואני לו לבן (שמות ד, כב): בני בכרי ישראל, (דברים יד, א): בנים אתם לה',</p> <p>הוא לי לרועה (תהלים פ, ב): רעה ישראל האזינה, ואני לו לצאן, (יחזקאל לד, לא): ואתן צאני צאן מרעיתי.</p> <p>הוא לי לשומר (תהלים קכא, ד): הנה לא ינום ולא יישן וגו', ואני לו לכרם, שְׁנָאֲמַר (ישעיה ה, ז): כי כרם ה' צב-אות בית ישראל.</p>
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The midrash is highly structured. It takes the framework of the pasuk, “dodi li, va’ani lo”, and replaces “dodi” with “hu”, for God, and then adds a single word after each half. Hu li l’X, va’ani lo l’Y, and each X and Y, God’s relationship to us, and ours to God, is substantiated by a proof text from the Tanakh. Beautiful and elegant.

Four cases are given in the first half of this midrash, and each of them becomes a line in the piyyut in front of us.

From the midrash we get the basis for:

כי אנו עמך ואתה א-להינו
אנו בניך ואתה אבינו

And then, skipping a few lines down:

אנו צאנך ואתה רוענו
אנו כרמך ואתה נוטרנו

And then two interesting things happen.

First, the paytan adds a whole host of relationships that were not in the midrash.

Now, some of the relationships are fully based on pesukim, like אנו פעולתך ואתה יוצרנו, which likely bases itself on a pasuk in Yishayahu which describes God as our Maker and we as God's product or handiwork. Or like אנו רעיתך ואתה דודנו, which draws directly from the pairing of the two lovers in Shir Hashirim.

But one line goes a small step further. אנו נחלתך ואתה גורלנו, which uses a pasuk in Yishayahu in which God calls Israel נחלתי, my portion. But there is no obvious source in the Tanakh that calls God our גורל – our lot, or our fate. The paytan makes a leap – a very small leap, but a leap nonetheless, *in inferring from what God says we are to God, to declare what God is to us*. In one sense it seems like a non-controversial thing to do, but at another level, it is a post-Biblical, late Rabbinic new name, or new descriptor, for God.

The message here to me is not trivial. We are inspired by the models in the Tanakh for our relationship with God. But we can expand upon them. The canon of ways of thinking about our relationship with God is not closed at the end of the Bible. And I don't believe it is closed at the end of the period of the Gemara or the medieval period, either. As we will see later, none other than the Piacezner Rebbe, the rabbi of the Warsaw ghetto, invited people as part of their spiritual growth to imagine their own vision of their relationship with God.

That was all point number one - the paytan adds some things that were not in the midrash, and the opportunity for us to develop new metaphors.

Point number two is that the paytan doesn't just add to this midrash in creating this piyyut. The paytan also leaves out of this piyyut a massive portion of the midrash – the whole, larger, second half. Let's turn our attention to that now by going back to SOURCE 4 in the middle.

4. Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:16 (cont'd)	שיר השירים רבה ב/טז
<p><u>God fights for me against those that challenge me, and I fight for God against those that provoke God.</u> God fights against those that challenge me, since God slew the firstborn of Egypt, as it says, <i>For I will go through the land of Egypt</i> (Exodus 12:12), and further, <i>And it came to pass at midnight, that the Lord smote all the firstborn</i> (ib. 29). I fight against those that provoke God, since I sacrificed the gods of Egypt. <i>God said, And against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgements</i> (ib. 12), and I sacrificed them to God, as it says, <i>Lo, if we sacrifice the abomination of the Egyptians before their eyes</i> (ib. 8:22), and also, <i>They shall take to them every man a lamb, according to their fathers' houses</i> (ib. 12:3).</p>	<p>הוא לי במקניאין ואני לו במכעיסין, הוא לי במקניאין, שהכה בכורי מצרים, שנאמר (שמות יב, יב): <i>ועברתי בארץ מצרים (שמות יב, כט): ויהי בחצי הלילה נה' ה' כל בכור. ואני לו במכעיסין, שזבחתי לאלהי מצרים. וכן (שמות יב, יב): ובכל אלהי מצרים אעשה שפטים. ואני זבחתיים לו, שנאמר (שמות ח, כב): הן נזבח את תועבת מצרים. וכן (שמות יב, ג): ויקחו להם איש אִישׁ לְבַיִת אָבֹת.</i></p>

The next bit of the midrash maps out a different type of relationship even as it uses the same syntactic frame of “Hu li X, va’ani lo Y”, but now the X and Y are not descriptions of complimentary relationships, but equal and opposite actions. Now the לי does not mean to me, but for me, like on my behalf.

God goes to bat for me with those who would challenge me, as it says that God slew the firstborn of Egypt, and I went to bat for God with those who would provoke God, as it says, we slew the Gods of Egypt – remember that the Torah describes that there was some kind of lamb worship in ancient Egypt, so the korban Pesah was not just a sign of worshipping the Israelites’ god, but actually a decide of the Egyptian god.

Even though this line of the midrash is simply basing itself on pesukim, it is saying something fairly radical on the face of it – God defends us, and we defend God. Or God stands up for us, and we stand up for God, in a way that each of us, so to speak, need! This is certainly much more reciprocal and equal than most of the lines in this piyyut.

Whereas in the piyyut what is equal and opposite is the framework, the “Hu li X, va’ani lo Y”, the X and Y almost always delineate a major power differential. In this second half of the midrash, encompassing far more examples than the first half, the overwhelming message is of reciprocity and almost, or complete, equality. Sometimes there are small differences, but they are small.

And so continues the midrash – God asks us to keep the mixed wine flowing, whatever that means, and we ask for God to keep the friendship flowing. God praises us and we praise God.

4. <i>Shir HaShirim Rabbah 2:16 (cont'd)</i>	שיר השירים רבה ב/טז
<p>God said to me: ‘Let not mingled wine be wanting,’ as it says, <i>Thy navel is like a round goblet, wherein no mingled wine is wanting</i> (S.S. 7:3), and I said to God, ‘You are my well beloved friend, let Your kindness never be wanting,’ as it says, <i>The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want</i> (Psalms 23:1).</p> <p>R’ Judah B’ R’ Il’ai said: <u>God sang of me and I sang of God; God extolled me and I extolled God; God called me, “My sister, My beloved, My dove, My perfect one,”</u> and I said to God, ‘<i>This is my beloved and this is my friend.</i>’ God said to me, ‘<i>Behold thou art fair, my love</i>’ (1:15), and I said to God, ‘<i>Behold thou art fair, my beloved, yea pleasant</i>’ (1:16). God said to me, ‘<i>Happy art thou, O Israel, who is like unto thee</i>’ (Deut. 33:29), and I said to God, ‘<i>Who is like unto Thee, O Lord, among the mighty</i>’ (Exodus 15:2). God said to me, ‘<i>And who is like Thy people, like Israel, a nation one in the earth</i>’ (II Samuel 7:23),</p>	<p>הוא אמר לי אל יחסר המזג, שְׁנַאֲמַר (שיר השירים ז, ג): שְׁרַרְךָ אֶגֶן הַסֵּהר אל יחסר המזג, ואני אמרתי לו את הוא רחמי טבא לא לחסר טבותך לעולם, היאך מה דאת אמר (תהלים כג, א): ה' רעי לא אחסר.</p> <p>אמר רבי יהודה בר רבי אלעאי, הוא זמרני ואני זמרתיו, הוא קלסני ואני קלסתיו, הוא קראני (שיר השירים ה, ב): אחתי בעיני יונתי תמתי, ואני אמרתי ליה (שיר השירים ה, טז): זה דודי וזה בעי. הוא אמר לי (שיר השירים ד, א): הנך יפה בעיני, ואני אמרתי לו (שיר השירים א, טז): הנך יפה דודי אף נעים. הוא אמר לי (דברים לג, כט): אשריך ישאאל מי כמוך, ואני אמרתי לו (שמות טו, יא): מי כמכה באלים ה'. הוא אמר לי (דברי הימים א יז,</p>

<p>and I declare the unity of God's name twice daily, saying, 'Hear O Israel the Lord our God, the Lord is one' (Deuteronomy 6:4).</p> <p><u>When I require anything, I seek it only from God's hand</u>, as it says, 'And it came to pass in the course of those many days that the King of Egypt died...and God heard their groaning...and God saw the children of Israel' (Exodus 2:23, ff). <u>And when God required anything, God sought it only from me</u>, as it says, <i>Speak ye unto all the congregation of Israel, saying</i> (ibid 12, 3).</p> <p><u>When I required something, I sought it only from God's hand</u>, as it says, <i>And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, etc</i> (ibid 14,10). <u>And when God required something, God sought it only from me</u>, as it says, <i>Speak to the children of Israel, that they take for Me an offering</i> (ibid 25:2).</p> <p><u>When I was in distress I sought assistance only from God: And the children of Israel cried unto the Lord; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron; and...he mightily oppressed the children of Israel</u> (Judges 4:3). What is meant by 'mightily'? With insults and blasphemies. <u>When God required something God sought it only from me</u>, as it says, <i>And let them make me a sanctuary</i> (Exodus 25:8).</p>	<p>(א): ומי קעמך ישׂראל גוי אחד בארץ, ואני מיחדת שמו בכל יום פעמים (דברים ו, ד): שמע ישׂראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד,</p> <p><u>לכשיהיה לי דבר לא תבעתי אלא מידו</u>, שְׁנֵאָמַר (שמות ב, כג כה): נִהְיֵה בַיָּמִים הַרְבִּימִים הָהֵם נִימַת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וְגו' נִשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת נַאֲקָתָם, וַיִּרְא אֶל־לֵהִים אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְכִשְׁהִיָּה לוֹ דָּבָר לֹא תִבַע אוֹתוֹ אֶל־אֵל מִמֶּנִּי וּמִיָּדִי, שְׁנֵאָמַר (שמות יב, ג): דַּבְּרוּ אֶל כָּל עַדְתַּת יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר,</p> <p><u>כְּשֶׁהִיָּה לִי דָבָר לֹא תִבַעֲתִי אֶל־אֵל מִיָּדוֹ</u>, שְׁנֵאָמַר (שמות יד, י): וּפְרַעֲהַ הַקְּרִיב נִישְׂאוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְגו', וְכִשְׁהִיָּה לוֹ דָּבָר לֹא תִבַע אֶל־אֵל מִמֶּנִּי, שְׁנֵאָמַר (שמות כה, ב): דַּבְּרֵי אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְחוּ לִי תְרוּמָה.</p> <p><u>וְכִשְׁהִיָּתָה לִי צָרָה לֹא תִבַעֲתִי אֶל־אֵל מִמֶּנִּי</u> (שופטים ד, ג): וַיִּצְעֲקוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל ה' כִּי תִשַׁע מְאוֹת רֶכֶב בְּרִזְלֵל לוֹ וְהוּא לֹחֵץ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּחִזְקָה וְגו', מֵהוּ בְּחִזְקָה בְּחִרוּפִין וְגִדּוּפִין, כְּשֶׁהִיָּה לוֹ דָּבָר לֹא תִבַע אֶל־אֵל מִמֶּנִּי, שְׁנֵאָמַר (שמות כה, ח): וַעֲשׂוּ לִי מִקְדָּשׁ.</p>
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And then the midrash gets so carried away that it drops the “Hu li, va’ani lo”, and just starts ticking off places where there are reciprocal frames. When I needed something, I asked God, as in the case of crying out from the pain of slavery. And when God needed something, a radical theological statement in and of itself, God sought it from me, as in the case of the korban Pesah. And again, when we needed something, we sought it from God, as at crossing the Yam Suf, and when God needed something, God sought it from us, as in asking for the contributions to build the mishkan.

Now notice the text does something interesting in the very last bit. It says that when we were in distress we called upon God. Here the parallel breaks. It doesn't say “when God was in distress God sought assistance only from us”, but reverts back to the language in previous sections, “When God required something, God sought it only from us.” You can't say God cried out to us in distress. There are red lines.

But still, look at this last section. When we were in trouble, with the Canaanites oppressing us for 20 years and attacking us with their advanced military warfare, we cried out to God and God delivered us

from their hand. And what God needed something, God sought it from us, as in commanding the building of the mishkan.

These last two parallels are quite amazing, in my opinion. Look at what the text is saying: when we were constricted with the Egyptians chasing us down and the water in front of us, choked with nowhere to go, God rescued us by making a space for us – a path through the waters. And then again many years later when our stability in our land was endangered, God rescued us. And when God needed a home on earth, God reached out to us, to collect the supplies, and build the house, something, the parallel seems to suggest, God couldn't really do on God's own.

This midrash has shifted from relationships of power differential, to relationships of intimacy, now to relationships of seeming equality, equal in action or the filling of needs even if not necessarily scope. The splitting of the sea is a bigger deal than collecting supplies for a Tabernacle. But maybe that's just how it seems to us. Maybe for God, I think the Midrash invites us to consider, collecting supplies was just as important as deliverance was to us.

Now why did the paytan leave out this second half of the midrash in composing the piyyut?

Maybe it seemed too radical. It became so equal that it felt diminishing of God to include these lines. What would happen to fear or awe of God, if we were just the ones who helped each other out in a time of need? If that's the case, we understand the paytan's hesitation, but we are still emboldened by the midrash's theological hutzpah in putting this idea forth.

Alternatively, there may be a simpler reason. Some of these later examples may have simply defied single word descriptions – they were too complex to distill down to a word, or, as we saw, because the language in the midrash shifted from “Hu li, va'ani lo” – God is my X, and I am God's Y, to things more elaborate like, “When I need something, I turn only to God, and when God needs something, God turns only to me”, the paytan felt this was a different sort of category, a new section of the midrash, and therefore left it out of the poem.

There's a final possibility, though, that I want to focus on for a moment – that this whole bunch of examples from the second half of the midrash – that they *are all in the piyyut*, all packed into one line, the only one which uses the same word for what we are to God as what God is to us, just as the midrash does in a few places in its second half.

I am referring to the very last line, the one that, at the end of the singing of this piyyut, with its rousing melody and energizing call, the one we linger on and stretch out – אנו מאמירך ואתה מאמירנו – I would wager that you will find about as many translations of this line as there are mahzorim in the world, and it's worth a few moments to understand what is unique about this last line – why it is the perfect closing to this theologically important poem. It comes straight from the Torah in Devarim 26, in one of Moshe's last covenantal summaries, in SOURCE 5.

<p>5. Deuteronomy 26:17-18</p>	<p>דברים כו/יז-יח</p>
<p>You have declared this day that <u>the Lord is your God</u> and that you will walk in obedience to God, that you will keep his decrees, commands and laws that you will listen to God. And the Lord has declared this day that <u>you are God's people</u>, God's treasured possession as God promised, and that you are to keep all God's commands.</p>	<p>את י-הוה האמרת היום להיות לך לא-להים וללכת בדרכיו ולשמר חקיו ומצותיו ומשפטיו ולשמע בקלו: וי-הוה האמירך היום להיות לו לעם סגלה כאשר דבר לך ולשמר כל מצותיו.</p>

It's a moment when the nation is ratifying a new covenant. They are a generation past slavery, a generation into a free relationship with God. There is no mountain hanging over their head like the midrashic vision of Sinai. They are choosing to partner with God and enter the land, walking forward into the next phase of their national destiny, their national partnership with God.

This word האמיר, the seeming causative of א.מ.ר., has no parallel in Scripture. It is a singular moment of genuine mutuality. And the commentaries translate it as anything from choose to exalt to affirm to single out to love.

There's something really powerful about this term and its place here in this piyyut. On the one hand, it holds the place of all those equal and opposite examples in the second half of the midrash. By using the same word for each relationship it covers all the ideas of we praise you and you praise us, we seek help from you and you from us, and the like.

And yet, in its context, the "he'emir"-ing takes us all the way back to the first relationship – look at what follows each usage of להאמיר – it's לא-להים לך להיות and להיות לו לעם. What are we "he'emir"-ing? That אנו עמך ואתה א-להינו!

So we go in both directions at once – we reach the most radical sense of equality and partnership with God, and that returns us to the sense that that is all embedded in the framework of the relationship between us and God.

In other words, part of what it means to be this עם with its א-להים is that we are truly partners. And part of that true partnership is that it only exists by virtue of our being the עם and God being the א-להים. Each relationship is only possible with, or because of, the other.

And it is in this context, on Yom Kippur, that we can continue on to open ourselves to God and confess our wrongdoings. And indeed it is worth noting that the next paragraph, which is widely presumed to be a part of this same piyyut, the last section in SOURCE 2, preserves the structure of we are X and you are Y, but changes the mode to focusing on the fact that in spite of all of the relationships mentioned above, or maybe because of them, we find ourselves here, filled with wrongdoing, and in the presence of God who is filled with compassion, *and so we can and should open up and share that with God.*

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Where have we come so far?

I believe we have seen this: The Torah itself depicts a wide range of descriptions of our relationship with God. The midrash develops them further, building out a structure that goes from greater power differential to more equality and closeness, even to a very surprising degree, taking things we do for God and placing them alongside things God does for us to create a relationship that looks almost mutually beneficial, mutually need-filling!

The paytan draws from this midrash. Takes inspiration from it to add other images and metaphors, and smashes the order to create a kind of a scatterplot effect, a sense that we bounce and move and shift from one model to the other depending on the moment and the need.

And perhaps the paytan removes some of the latter models from the midrash, or perhaps condenses them into the final image of absolute structural equals, מאמירים, which then brings us full circle to those equals being a part of what it means to be a nation and its God.

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And what does this mean for all the questions we asked above, about our relationship with God and how it exists in a world with so much that seems to struggle with that God of Unetaneh Tokef?

I can only say I think it encourages us to think broadly and be open to these different models. If the King doesn't resonate, what about the shepherd? If the one who chose us as a nation doesn't resonate, what about the vineyard guardian or the lover, or the covenantal partner?

It encourages us to flesh out these models.

Let me provide one example. For me, who was blessed to grow up with loving and attentive parents, which not all of us were, and who truly feels like one of the luckiest sons in the world, the **אנו בניך ואתה אבינו**, we are your children and you are our father, is a very powerful metaphor. Not just because of the love relationship I have with my parents, and with my father, and the closeness, and the gratitude, and the sense of being held, but also now because I see it from the other side. For being a father now, I also relate to God in this metaphor, if such a thing is possible, as I look at what my children seek from me, and locate in myself the things I know I yearn for as a child still, even now as an adult child.

I've found myself moved over the last year or two by the words of Eviatar Banai in his song Abba, in SOURCE 6, words which I think help me understand what it means to be a child, and a parent, and what we might be seeking sometimes in our relationship with God:

SOURCE 6 [SING]

6. "Abba", by Eviatar Banai	"אבא", אביתר בנאי
Abba, I want to stand before You To believe that You are a good Abba Abba, I need to know that You love me Just like that, a good Abba.	אבא, אני רוצה לעמוד מולך להאמין שאתה אבא טוב אבא, אני צריך לדעת שאתה אוהב אותי ככה שתם אבא טוב.
Abba, I want to be sure with all my heart that this journey will have a good ending That everything I am going through along the way will turn weakness into great strength.	אבא, אני רוצה להיות בטוח בכל ליבי שלמסע הזה יהיה סוף טוב שכל מה שאני עובר בדרך יהפוך חולשה לעוצמה גדולה.
Abba, I want to go back to myself to find You there with me At my core, I am wholly good, Abba And there I believe in myself.	אבא, אני רוצה לחזור אלי למצוא אותך שם איתי במקור שלי אני טוב גמור, אבא ושם אני מאמין בעצמי.

If there was ever a tefillah, this is it. This is, of course, not just a song about lowercase a abba, but about the ultimate Abba. It's about what we want or need from God, however we understand that God to be. For me, it's one of the things that binds me to God – the belief, the hope, that there might be something beyond me, beyond all of us, before all of us, that can reassure us that the ultimate finish line is good. That the pain and the weakness results in strength and comfort at the end. Even holding the belief that

the suffering and the pain is a part of the world created by that very same God, that God is still the source of my hope.

Is God all-powerful and all-knowing and all-beneficent in all of these metaphors? The midrash and the piyyut doesn't answer that question, and I don't think we have to in our theologies. And I don't think we have to stay with one answer for all of those attributes all of the time.

Dr. Marc Shapiro, whom we look forward to welcoming back as a scholar in residence this coming Shavuot has done amazing work exploring the different views by mainstream and traditional Jewish thinkers over the centuries, and has helped us understand that we are often hindered by being boxed into a vision of God that was attributed to – I can't even necessarily say advanced by, but rather attributed to – the Rambam, Maimonides, that certainly reflects an important stream within the history of Jewish theological reflection, but was also certainly never the exclusive nor even the majority model throughout Jewish history.

The Maimonidean God that some of us struggle to believe in, is also, in turn, quite different in many ways from God as conceived by many Jewish philosophers, sages, Kabbalists, and Biblical-era Jews.

This midrash, and this piyyut, I believe, are there to encourage us to be open to not just staying in the game because there is more than one way of understanding and relating to God, but also investing in actually cultivating and putting forth different perspectives, different feelings, different modes of relating to God.

V.

One of the most powerful texts that invites us into some kind of imaginative and exploratory work as part of our developmental relationship with God, even against what we might consider normative Orthodox theology, is this fascinating excerpt of the Piasecner rebbe, R Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, also known by the name of his popular work, the Esh Kodesh. One of his other writings was a long pamphlet, entitled Bnei Mahshavah Tovah, in which he detailed the guidelines and activities of a hevraya, an intentional community, made of a group of, in this culture, men, who would meet regularly and devote themselves to character refinement and, most of all, to deepening their relationship with God, striving to see God in all facets of their lives. He actually formed such a havurah, it is believed, to work on these goals together.

The group's charter, by the way, included encouragement to sing niggunim and even dance in order to arouse their spirits to closeness to God. Sounds like the Bayit!

The Piazechner reports a challenge, and his suggestion in light of it, in SOURCE 7. This is a long text, so let me read and explain it piece by piece.

7. <i>The Thoughtful Community</i> (R. Kalonymus Shapira, 20th c. Poland), Sec. 7	בני מחשבה טובה אות ז
<p>A young man has already pleaded to me, saying, "if I could imagine a particular image when I stand before God in prayer, I would easily be inspired, like one who stands pleading before the Omnipotent One who has the power to deliver me, or I might tremble and quake from the thought and image that I am standing before the throne of glory. However, since it's prohibited for me to imagine any such image or picture, ... this is all impossible for me. Who knows if this might not have been the basis of the sin of the mixed multitude, who said, "let us make for ourselves a God who will go before us" (Ex. 32:1), that we might see it...</p> <p>Now, since the foundation of our group is not to rebuke ..., since in truth everyone longs to be pure-hearted people of spiritual ascent, ... And since the basis of our group is to lend a shoulder down to the low place of our peers, to the soles of their bodies and souls, and from there to lift them through the appropriate means, we must seek for them a right repair and advice how to accustom them according to their condition.</p> <p>Therefore a person in this situation, at the beginning of the growth and expansion of the mind, must rely on the Raavad ob"m who responded to the Rambam ob"m in Laws of Repentance 3:7 as follows: "Avraham says- Why does he call this one a min? A number of those greater and better etc followed this reasoning etc." Simply, it is difficult to understand the Raavad – this is an explicit verse: "you saw no picture" (Dt. 4:15), and similar verses... According to what we have said, it's not that the Raavad would say that a person would mistakenly say that there is, God forbid, some picture above, forbid our even mentioning it, but as mentioned above the person indeed knows that God is no picture, God forbid. It's merely that a person, bound by flesh and material and perceptibility invents this for oneself, in order that one's thoughts can take hold, grow, and expand, and the more God helps strengthen one's thoughts to conceive of God in strong, clean conceptions, then a spark of prophecy will be revealed to that person, and then the physicality of that picture will disappear, and the person can imagine during prayer that one is standing before God and</p>	<p>כבר התנצל אברך לפני ואמר, אם הייתי יכול לצייר לפני איזה דמות בשעה שאני עומד לפני השי"ת בתפלה הייתי מתעורר פשוט על כל פנים כמו מי שמבקש ומתחנן לפני הכל יכול שיש בידו להושיע לי, או שהייתי מזדעזע ומרתת מן המחשבה והציור בעצמו שאני עומד לפני כסא הכבוד, אבל כיון שאסור לצייר לי שום דמות וציור ... זה אי אפשר לי כלל. ומי יודע אם לא היתה זאת גם יסוד וסיבת חטא הערב רב, שאמרו עשה לנו אלהים שילכו לפנינו, ושנראהו....</p> <p>וכיון שיסוד חברתנו הוא שלא לגער ..., כי באמת גם כולם רוצים להיות טהורי לב ובני עליה ..., וכל יסוד חברתנו הוא להרכין את הכתף למקום נמיכיות החברים עד כפות רגלי נפשם וגופם, ומשם להעלותם באמצעים מתאימים להם, לכן נראה נא גם להם תקנה ועצה איך להרגילם כפי מצבם.</p> <p>לכן האיש במצב כזה בראשית גידול והתרחבות מחשבתו יסמוך את עצמו על הראב"ד ז"ל שמשיב על הרבמ"ם ז"ל פרק ג' מהלכות תשובה הלכה ז' וזה לשונו: א"א ולמה קרא לזה מין כמה גדולים וטובים וכו' הלכו בזו המחשבה וכו'. ועל פי פשוט קשה להבין את דברי הראב"ד ז"ל הלא מקרא מלא הוא, כי לא ראיתם כל תמונה וכדומה... ולפי הנ"ל לא שאמר הראב"ד ז"ל שיטעה האיש לאמור שיש ח"ו למעלה שום תמונה, חס מלהזכיר, אבל כנ"ל באמת ידע האיש שהשם יתברך אינו בעל שום תמונה ח"ו רק הוא הקרוץ מחומר איש מגושם בעל תמונה ממציא לו זאת, כדי שתוכל מחשבתו להאחז ולהתגדל ולהתרחב, וכאשר יעזור לו ה' ותתחזק מחשבתו ותוכל לחשוב בה' מחשבה חזקה ונקיה, ודמיון ניצוץ נבואה יתגלה לו, אז התמונה מציור גופני הזה ממילא יתבטלו, ויוכל לצייר לו בעת תפלתו שעומד לפני ה' יתברך ולפני כסא כבודו ענין כדי לשבר את האוזן וכדי לשבר המחשבה מה שיכולה לחשוב ולדמות.</p>

<p>God's throne of glory – matters used just to appease the ear and thought.</p> <p>You, too, member of the group, in dire circumstances imagine for yourself that you are standing before God's throne of glory praying and pleading of God simply like a child crying and pleading before a parent, "please have mercy upon me, I can no longer bear the wanderings of the body and failings of spirit. From the time you abandoned me and hid yourself from us, I have been surrounded by destruction." What person, even stonehearted, would not melt upon imagining this image, standing before the throne of glory, a consuming fire, pleading for oneself and one's family, and all Israel?</p>	<p>וגם אתה חבר החברייא בשעת הדחק צייר לך שאתה עומד לפני כסא כבודו ואתה מתפלל ומבקש ממנו יתברך פשוט כבן שבוכה ומתחנן מאביו רחם נא עלי אבי, כבר אי אפשר לי לסבול נדודי הגוף ועזיבת הרוח, ומן העת אשר השלכתי ממך והתסרת פניך מאתנו, מגור מסביב, ומי הוא האיש אף בלב אבן שלא ימס בשעה שמצייר במחשבתו את הדמות הזאת, איך הוא עומד לפני כסא כבודו אש אוכלת ומתחנן על עצמו ועל בני ביתו ועל כל ישראל.</p>
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To me, this is a remarkable teaching. First, it returns to remind us that theological challenges often hit us most of all when it comes to tefillah. Even when we want to pray, when we want to believe, it can be hard to believe in an intangible God.

So R Shapira takes a minority opinion in the realm of theology, and interpret it palatably, and applies it lightly and carefully, and says, if it helps you on your journey, close your eyes and picture something when you pray.

For some of us his dispensation might feel obvious, and for others radical, and for others, somewhere in between. The point to me is that a traditional teacher, in attempting to make room for relationship with God on the part of his student, is willing to go out to a theological edge.

R Shapira's models are from the more widespread classical ones, but what would it look like to try this exercise as a part of tefillah, at least once in a while? To choose an image that relates to one of the metaphors in the midrash, or in the piyyut, or to select our own, and to have it in mind when we daven?

Or not only when we daven, but when we pause to ask ourselves what our relationship with God is, or means, or looks like? What if we closed our eyes and imagined something? Pictured something? We wouldn't be saying that is God, but that that conjures up some feeling of relationship which is the one we want to have.

Sometimes, once in a long while, when I give myself the gift of this opportunity, whether specifically because I am in a place of more connection, or specifically because I am in a place of less connection, before the Shemoneh Esrei, I will imagine myself like a small child standing on the edge of the earth, eyes wide open, and mouth agape, looking out at a glittering sky of stars and Milky Way and beyond,

with shooting stars and meteors whizzing by, and sounds whispering into the great expanse of mystery. And just picture, and listen, and feel both infinitesimally small, and inextricably connected to the entirety of being. And then daven. אנו טפִיךְ ואתה עולמנו – we are your small children, and you are our Universe.

VI.

All of what we have said so far has been built on the so-called Xs and Ys in the language of the midrash, “Hu li l’X, va’ani lo l’Y”, or the Xs and Ys in the piyyut’s language of “Anu X, v’atah Y”. That in their variety we find room to think broadly about what a relationship with God can be.

But I would contend that as much as the power of this piyyut is located in the specific examples, the Xs and the Ys, of our relationships with God, as much if not more is located in the frame of the midrash and the piyyut, in the repetitive frame, Anu... V’Atah. Anu... V’Atah. Anu... V’Atah.

This repetitive frame is striking in two ways, ways in which it reframes the midrash on which it is based. Let’s return again to SOURCE 4. We notice that the standard frame, of course based on the pasuk דודי לי ואני לו, is the parallel “Hu li, va’ani lo”. And so all the relationship metaphors are introduced that way in the midrash.

The first thing the paytan does is reverse the order of subjects. Instead of starting with what God is to us, the paytan starts with what we are to God, with the “anu” (we also notice the shift from ani to anu – I’m saving that for last tonight). This reorients us to acknowledge that our relationship with God begins with a sense of who we are, either to God, or altogether. Self-knowledge has to form the basis of our connection with God. In a sense I tried to express this on Rosh Hashanah in talking about the shofar as sounding our inner voice, requiring us to first identify our true selves before we can even begin the journey to our best selves.

I believe that so it goes with our relationship to God. Even though our belief in God presumes that of course God came before us, but our connection to God begins with some understanding of ourselves. We need the ani or the anu, before the atah.

This brings us to the second revelation of the paytan. It’s what I just said – the atah. The midrash never says atah. It says hu. It refers to God in the 3rd person.

Again, there's nothing surprising about that – it's a reflection of how the pasuk in Shir Hashirim refers to the lover's relationship with the beloved. Dodi li – he is my beloved. Va'ani lo – and I am his, she says.

What *is surprising* is that the paytan transfers this language from third person to second person. *From hu to atah.*

This tectonic shift cannot be overstated. This is a huge move. We intuitively understand – more than that, we feel – the difference between relating to God as hu and as atah.

In fact, the more I thought about this change, and the more I thought about atah, the more I came to feel that *the whole question of our relationship with God comes to rest on the word atah.*

I can go through life with a hu-God – a “who(?)‑God” – who is just all the things we have said about God in our texts and our history, and I don't have to really wrestle with that relationship all that much. I can put hu somewhere else, even when I daven. I can talk about him, her, it, God, even a whole variety of names for God, without having to bring myself into it. But when I say atah, that atah is coming from ani. There is only an atah because there is an ani. And then I need to face, engage and confront You.

And more than the challenge of that, I hope, is the opportunity. When I say atah, I can feel something. I can experience something that is personal and subjective and deep.

~

I am grateful to my brother-in-law R Dr Elie Kaunfer who, in talking with him about this idea, shared with me the following deeper development of the atah in tefillah, included in his amazing forthcoming book on tefillah:

In the Tanakh, the word ברוך is almost always succeeded with the word 'ה. That is to say, when we express blessing or gratitude to God, we do so in the third person. The notion of adding in atah as a regular part of the liturgy, of the most basic formula of a berakhah, was a daring, bold innovation of the rabbis.

Not everyone was on board. The titans of the transition from Mishnah to Gemara, Rav and Shmuel, debated the requirement to include atah in our blessings, as the Talmud Yerushalmi records in SOURCE 8.

8. Talmud Yerushalmi Berakhot 9:3	תלמוד ירושלמי (ונציה) ברכות ט/ג
Rav said: One needs to say "you" [in the blessing formula] Shmuel said: One does not need to say "you".	רב אמר צריך לומר "אתה", ושמואל אמר אינו צריך לומר "אתה".

As Rav Elie writes in his book,

“Rav states that one needs to say אתה – to speak directly to God. Rav believes that talking about God simply won’t do. The act of saying the amidah – of saying any blessing in Jewish liturgy – is an act of speaking directly to God without any mediation. I am able to speak directly to God, and the second word of the prayer leads me into that stance.”

And we poskin like Rav, and as the medieval commentary Arugat Habosem explains in SOURCE 9,

9. Arugat Habosem (13th c Bohemia) Vol. 1 p. 127	ערוגת הבושם אעמ' קכו
Therefore it was established (to say) in blessings: “ <i>barukh atah</i> ”, as if one is speaking mouth to mouth with the listener.	על כן הוק[ב]ע בברכות 'ברוך אתה', כאילו מדבר פה לפה לשומע.

This is the revelation of the power of atah, which is highlighted by seeing how the paytan shifts from the language of the midrash to the language of the piyyut. It’s a difference we feel in our bones. More than trying to describe it, let me just show it.

Honestly, compare [SING]: והוא א-להינו, ובי אנו עמך, ואתה א-להינו to, בי אנו עמך, ואתה א-להינו.

You feel it, right?

For me, personally, the word atah in tefillah is my litmus test of where I am at with God. The reason it’s harder for me to have kavvanah, I think, when I am struggling with God is because I have to say atah, and I can’t rely on anyone or anything else’s relationship with God in that moment.

And sometimes I don’t feel that atah, and it’s hard to say that atah.

But here’s the thing for me, building on what we have learned so far: that atah doesn’t have to be one specific thing. It can be the shepherd or the parent or the God or the lover.

Sometimes the atah is no more and no less than the presence I felt at the birth of each of our children, at the incomparable miracle of new life emerging, it's the אתה יוצרנו, the You who is the Creator.

And so differently, but no less, for me, it is the presence I felt at the delivery of our girls Temima and Yakira whose yahrzeit, which is their birthday, is coming up two days after Yom Kippur. In that pain and stillness and silence, too, for me, I felt a presence, an atah, the atah of עמי אתה בצרה, of the You Who does not leave me alone in my travail. Sometimes we do feel that, and sometimes we don't.

Sometimes the atah is the presence that is manifest in hearing or discovering a Torah insight that is so enriching and inspiring that I feel its ultimate source is just atah, אתה מורנו, the You Who is our teacher and our Source of knowledge and wisdom in this world.

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This atah is the one we are invited to imagine, to envision, to place before us, in the Gemara about tefillah and our relationship with God that is here in SOURCE 10.

10. Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 22a	תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף כב.
R. Hanah b. Bizna said in the name of R. Shimon Hasida, the worshipper needs to see him/herself as if the Divine Presence is opposite him/her, as it is said, "I have placed the LORD before me always" (Ps. 16:8).	אמר רב חנה בר ביזנא אמר רבי שמעון חסידא המתפלל צריך שיראה עצמו כאילו שכינה כנגדו שנאמר (תהלים טז/ח) שויתי ה' לנגדי תמיד.

I love this Gemara. On the one hand, what's the hidush? What's the alternative? That a mitpallel does not need to imagine that God is opposite them when they pray? What else is the purpose of prayer?

I think this Gemara is communicating two points to us, two points that reinforce ideas we have already seen both in R Shapira's text and in the arguments we have just made about the Ani v'Atah.

First, reinforcing R Shapira's idea, there is an imaginative, envisioning component to this notion of how we daven. We have to actually conjure up the sense that the Shekhinah is there. Even in the Gemara, I think the idea of the Shekhinah is already among the more "embodied" senses of God's presence. The idea is to try to actually imagine a manifestation of God כנגדו – right there in front of us.

In addition to humility and aspiration, there is a part of the atah which actually invites a face to face connection with God. God is not, or not just, above, but also across from, in front of, כנגד, each and every one of us.

By the way, although this is more than an aside, the idea that this is a fulfillment of the verse 'שׁוֹיִתִּי ה' לנגדי תמיד seems puzzling. If its application is to the mitpallel, the worshipper, then how is it תמיד, how is it always? One possibility is that תמיד doesn't actually mean at every moment, it just means regularly. We place God before us regularly means that in the thrice-daily, ie. regular, act of tefillah, we want to feel God right in front of us.

But I think the Gemara may be saying something more. Do you want to be a mitpallel? Someone who davens? Who really prays? Who is self-reflective, as mitpallel is often explained to mean?

So you need to try to place God before you always – to feel like God is not just up there, but right here.

But this leads to the second point from above that I think this Gemara amplifies – that cultivating the atah depends on a sense of the ani. That's why the Gemara says יראה את עצמו כאילו, one should see oneself as though. Not just יחשוב or ידמיין – not just think, picture or imagine that God's presence is opposite us, but see ourselves that way.

Strive to know ourselves and understand ourselves and tell our story with God as a part of it.

VII.

In this last section of the power of atah, I have described the counterpart as ani. And, in fact, in the midrash, because the verse from Shir Hashirim describes a pair of lovers, the allegory preserves the singular – Hu li, va'ani lo. God is to me, and I am to God.

And as we have shown, the relationship necessarily begins with much exploration of ourselves, and our individual, broadly construed and diverse and divergent and ever-changing and dynamic relationship with God.

But the paytan of Ki Anu Amekha, recognizing that we are going from here into the viduy which is collective, אשמנו בגדנו – we were guilty, we betrayed, makes the shift to Anu. We.

This is the last piece of the God relationship – the collective one, and I will just touch on it, as the hour is late, although it deserves much more time.

It's the recognition that we can – no, that we must – lean on and be inspired by, and wrestle together with and confide our struggles about God in, each other.

Anu is a beautiful word. It is Ani, it starts with me, and then that yod gets longer. It is stretched, strengthened, and stabilized. That longer tail, that turns ani into anu, is community.

I actually imagine the tip of the yod as the part pointing up towards God. The tiny leg, just that dotl is the "l". Then all 200 of us, or 600,000, or 12 million, are dots below that ultimately bleed into one straight line, and ani becomes anu.

It's the consciousness that another avenue to God is just to get into the room with other people who are seeking, who are hoping, who are trying, and sing our hearts out together as we do every RH and YK, and in this Bayit what we are trying to model is that we do it every Friday night and Shabbat morning, and, while on a Wednesday morning at 6:45am we may not sing our hearts out, the religious core of the Bayit is built in large part upon those who come and seek God in community every morning and every evening.

But it's of course not only in tefillah, although that has been a focus of our learning and thinking this evening, because God is so brought to the fore in that space – in this space.

It's in learning Torah and acts of hesed and moments of family and community that we can do together that we can strengthen each other in the feeling that anu helps us feel that there is an atah.

And, as I always try to encourage, it's in safe, non-judgmental, vulnerable, and courageous conversation, in which we make room for each other's questions, and share our moments of distance and our moments of closeness.

Our atah moments, and what that atah looked like and felt like. And what it means to us.

I hope and pray we will do more of that in the year ahead, as I have in some small way tried to do tonight.

VIII.

5780 has begun.

It's such a dark world, and such a bright world.

It needs our questions and our deep desire to ask them, without fear, even if with trepidation, and it needs our answers, incomplete though they may be, and our striving, and our moments of relationship with God of every kind, parent-child, lovers, vineyard-watchman, subject-king, and equal affirmer, maamirekha and maamirenu.

It needs us not just to say who, or hu, but to say atah.

So let's join in two tefillot.

The one at the end of our sources, SOURCE 11, by Rabbi Naomi Levy, whose book of tefillot "Talking to God" I cannot recommend enough, and then return to Ki Anu Amekha.

The two are, in so many ways, the two tefillot I need in this season.

With prayers for a year of health, peace, strengthening and supporting each other, and of anis, anus, and atah.

[READ]

11. A Prayer for Returning to God After Enduring a Difficult Time, "Talking to God", by Rabbi Naomi Levy

God, I need to know that You are with me, that You hear my cry.
I long to feel Your presence
not just this day, but every day. When I am weak
and in pain, I need to know You are beside me.
That in itself is often comfort enough.

I do not pretend to know Your ways, to know
Why this world You have created can be so beautiful, so magnificent,
and yet so harsh, so ugly, and so full of hate.

There are times when I want to have nothing to
do with You. When to think of You brings nothing
but confusion and ambivalence.

And there are times, like this time, when I seek
to return to You, when I feel the emptiness that

comes when I am far from You.

Watch over me and my loved ones. Forgive me
for all that I have not been. Help me to appreciate
all that I have and to realize all that I have to offer.
Help me to find my way back to You so that
I may never feel alone. Amen.

[SING]

2. Ki Anu Amecha - Yom Kippur Machzor	כי אנו עמך – מחזור ליום כפור
For We are your nation; and You are our King. We are Your children; and You are our Father. We are Your servants; and You are our Master. We are Your congregation; and You are our Portion. We are Your inheritance; and You are our Destiny. We are Your flock; and You are our Shepherd. We are Your vineyard; and You are our Keeper. We are Your work; and You are our Creator. We are Your dear ones and You are our Beloved. We are Your treasure; and You are our God. We are Your people; and You are our King. We are Your distinguished ones; and You are our Distinguished One.	כִּי אָנוּ עַמְּךָ וְאַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ אָנוּ בְנֵיךָ וְאַתָּה אָבִינוּ אָנוּ עַבְדֶיךָ וְאַתָּה אֲדוֹנֵנוּ אָנוּ קְהֵלְךָ וְאַתָּה חֻלְקֵנוּ אָנוּ נַחֲלֶתְךָ וְאַתָּה גוֹרְלֵנוּ אָנוּ צֹאנְךָ וְאַתָּה רוֹעֵנוּ אָנוּ כַרְמְךָ וְאַתָּה נוֹטְרֵנוּ אָנוּ פְעֻלֶתְךָ וְאַתָּה יוֹצְרֵנוּ אָנוּ רְעִיתְךָ וְאַתָּה דוֹדֵנוּ אָנוּ סִגְלֶתְךָ וְאַתָּה אֱ-לֹהֵינוּ אָנוּ עַמְּךָ וְאַתָּה מְלֻכֵנוּ אָנוּ מְאֻמֵיֶיךָ וְאַתָּה מְאֻמֵיֶרְנוּ.

Shanah tovah.