

“Ask not what God can do for you; Ask what you [and only you] can do for God.”

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin

Congregation Har Shalom, Potomac, MD

Rosh Hashanah Day 2, 5773

I hope that everyone had a wonderful, rejuvenating summer. Of the many things that happened in my life over this past summer, perhaps the most important, is that Sari and I celebrated our 15th wedding anniversary! And I believe that after 15 years, I’m finally starting to get it...I think I’ve finally figured out the most important skill for guaranteeing a successful marriage; and that is, to be a successful spouse you really have to be able to understand two different languages...you have to essentially be bilingual. The bilingualism I’m referring to; the languages you must be fluent in understanding are (1.) the spoken and (2.) the unspoken...what is heard in our communication with each other and what is unheard...what is said and what is unsaid, the audible and the inaudible, the explicit and the implicit. If you only understand one of those languages, like you only comprehend what is spoken to you by your spouse but you are a total gringo, an ignoramus when it comes to non-verbal communication, then you’re dead! You can’t make a marriage work if you can’t pick up on non-verbal cues. Think about the simple inquiry,” How was your day today honey?” Six words spoken daily in households across the country—across the globe even! “Fine. It was fine.” Now a *non*-bilingual spouse will leave it at that, and not realize that his honey’s day was anything but fine; The bilingual spouse will immediately intuit that the answer “fine,” spoken flatly and curtly actually demands follow up questions, eye contact, genuine concern and interest and probing. To be a spouse is to speak and understand unique languages with your partner. In Hebrew, the term for marriage is *kiddushin*, which comes from the word *kadosh*...which means separate, distinct, unlike anything else. When you marry another person you enter into a very exclusive club of two; Marriage is such a unique, exclusive kind of partnership, it’s no wonder that when the Torah seeks the best, most appropriate metaphor for the relationship between God and people, so very often the Torah makes use of the metaphor of marriage. And just as we understand and intuit things from our spouses, just as there is the spoken and the unspoken in marital discourse, I believe the very same to be true in our relationship with God. There are the things that we all do collectively as

Jews...giving tzedakah, listening to the shofar on Rosh Hashana, and several hundreds of other mitzvot that we do or aspire to do because that's what all Jews do. That's what binds us together as a community of co-religionists. But I also believe that each of us has a unique destiny. That no one, not one person sitting here is an accident...your parents may have created you by accident, but as far as God is concerned, you are meant to be here, right now. You were created with a purpose, and with a package of gifts and talents that you uniquely possess, in combinations unlike any other living soul. This is not about lighting shabbes candles or eating matza on Passover...this is about what you can accomplish in this world that no one else can. This is about why you and you specifically were brought into this world.

On these High Holidays, I think many folks come into this place with a list...perhaps not a list that's written down, but a list in our heads of what we *want*, of what we *need* God to do for us in the New Year...We pray for health, we pray for wealth, we pray for happiness, and we pray for peace. 'In this New Year may I earn a promotion at work, may the stock market be high, and may my PSA levels be low; May my credit score be high—but not my teenagers, and may my blood pressure be low...' We've all got our lists, and some items on the list are shall we say less sublime than others. But how many of us come here on Rosh Hashana or Yom Kippur and say 'Okay God, in 5773, **what do You need me to do for You?**' How can I serve you? What do you need from me that no one else in this world can do for you? If this sounds foreign to you, I refer you to the beloved High Holiday prayer that begins with the words, *Shema Koleynu*. In that prayer we say to God: *Anu avadecha v'Atah Adoneinu*: We are your servants, and You are our Master. Yet how often in Jewish life do we talk about being servants? It is rare in the fiercely independent society that we live in when we truly admit to a power higher than ourselves. How often do we hear people speak of having a calling to do or give or pursue something specific with their lives. I remember from my Seminary years that it was common to hear Protestant and Catholic Seminarians speak of when they got the call; not anything relating to a phone, but a call in the sense of an overwhelming, undeniable sense of being drawn to do something with their lives. I think it's tragically uncommon for Jews to speak like that—I know I didn't even know how to answer the question at first when a non-Jew asked about my calling to become a rabbi. But as my faith matured, I have come to believe increasingly that I not only have a corporate, collective relationship with God via the Jewish people, but that God actually has some expectations *of me as an individual*, and has equipped me to do something uniquely significant

with my life. Now if this sounds far-fetched to you, listen to what Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote in his book *God in Search of Man*: “Is it plausible to believe that the Eternal should be concerned with the trivial? Should we not rather assume that man is too insignificant to be an object for his concern? The truth, however, is that nothing is trivial. What seems infinitely small in our eyes is infinitely great in the eyes of the infinite God.”¹

Moses had to figure this out too...he was called a lot of names in his time...and not always nice names. Moses was a lawgiver, a prophet, a freedom fighter, a teacher, a rabbi, a spokesman, a father, a son, a son-in-law, a brother...but the most honorific title that Moses possessed was *EVED*. Servant. Moses is called God’s servant more than any other character in the Bible, and when he dies, of all the epitaphs God could have used to describe him, God says, *Moshe avdi met*, Moses **My servant** has died.² *Moshe avdi*, Moses my servant. You know it wasn’t always that way between Moses and God. Moses’ early life was fraught with self-doubt, insecurity, and second guessing. But he becomes an *Eved Hashem*, he becomes God’s servant when he starts to figure out his unique mission; the vocation he was called to do. He learned to hear God’s voice both at Sinai and at the burning bush; that is to say the explicit and the implicit voice of the Divine. He learned to listen, but also to intuit God’s will. He figured out how to get past his fears and stand for something of utmost significance with his life. We get all bent out of shape because we don’t understand why he can’t enter the Promised Land at the end of such a distinguished life, but he stands there on Mt. Nebo in Deuteronomy 34 and gazes quietly, peacefully across the Jordan valley. Entering that land would not be part of his mission, and he had grown to accept that.

I started thinking about this whole question of servanthood this past summer while on a family cruise to Alaska. One night there was a fabulous performer, whose stage name is Sarge--a Jewish comedian from New York who was adopted as a child and is half black and half white. That’s a whole career’s worth of repertoire for any comedian! After I literally hurt myself laughing from his performance, I went to meet him outside the theater after the show to tell him how much I enjoyed it, especially the Jewish jokes. We ended up talking until nearly 1:00 AM. He told me about his childhood, his life story, and about years of his life when he was abusing

¹ Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1955. Page 413

² Joshua 1:2

drugs and alcohol and even, for a time, living on the streets, homeless and stealing to support his habits. He told me that one of the most important tools for him to get clean and sober and turn his life around was that he begins every day—to this very day—by asking God these four questions. These four questions cannot be found in the Haggadah, but they are pretty powerful nonetheless. He begins every day by asking God: “Where do you want me to go? What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say, and to whom?” By asking himself daily these questions, he said he transformed his life from a life of want, a life of entitlement, a life of asking what the world owes me, to a life of giving and generosity; a life of awareness that he has precious and incomparable gifts to share with others. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes: *We are changed not by what we receive, but by what we do.* This is the essence of my comedian-friend’s transformation, and I believe it can be the essence of ours as well. So many studies have shown that the best predictor of happiness in life is discovering your purpose in life! And when you think about it, it is very difficult to be happy when you’re not really sure what it all means: Getting up in the morning, going to work, coming home and watching TV, going to bed and then doing it all over again the next day. How many people lay their heads down on their pillows and ask, what’s this all for? Why am I doing this? Those are not very happy questions...they expose a certain fallacy in our daily routines...an undeniable sense that something big is missing. Being able to figure out what indeed it’s all for is nothing less than a breakthrough moment in life.

There is a wonderful Hassidic tale about the 18th Century Ukranian rebbe named Zusya of Hanipol. According to the story, as Reb Zusya lay on his death bed surrounded by his hassidim, his beloved students, he became very upset and started sobbing uncontrollably. His students asked with great concern, Reb Zusya why are you so distraught? Why are you crying? Are you afraid that when you die and stand before the heavenly tribunal that you will be compared to David or Solomon or that you will be asked why you were not more like Moses? With tears streaming down his cheeks Reb Zusya answered, I am not afraid that the Holy One will ask me why I was not more like Moses; rather I am terrified that the Holy One will say “Zusya, why were you not more like **Zusya**?” You see there is a destiny that we are all created to fulfill in this world that nobody else can! But we are so predisposed to look at the world as a place to take from rather than to give to...it probably comes from our animalistic tendencies; the instincts of hunting and gathering; the need to survive. But we are more than animals, and God expects more of each and every one of us.

God reassured a doubting prophet Jeremiah a few thousand years ago by telling him, “*ki al kol asher eshlachecha teilech, ve’et kol asher atzavecha tedabeir...* Go wherever I send you, and speak whatever I command you (Jer. 1:7).” Or as my comedian friend asks in a remarkably similar formulation: Where do you want me to go? What do you want me to do? What do you want me to say, and to whom? Ever since our cruise ship encounter, I have tried to ask myself these questions. How am I supposed to use my unique talents, my gifts, my abilities to serve God and to give uniquely of myself to others? In the various encounters that are placed on my path each day, what does that other person need to hear from me? What words of reassurance or kindness can they walk away with from our encounter? What is my purpose in this world God? Why am I here at this time and under these circumstances? What do you need me to do for you? I want to invite you to start your day by asking these questions. And to do that I have created a card that you can take home with you. Tape it to your bathroom mirror, stick it in your wallet or under the glass on your desk. Stick it onto the fridge with a magnet, whatever works for you...because the best vocation there is, is that of being a servant. *An eved*; Of living a life of service and generosity rather than of narcissism and vanity. *Ki anu avadecha ve’atah Adoneinu*, because we are Your servants God, and You are our Master. Help us both to hear your commandments, and to hear the whisper of your voice guiding us, directing us, inspiring us to a life of purpose. A life and a destiny that no one but you or I can uniquely fulfill.

It was back in the shtetl that a member of Reb Zalman’s community requested a private meeting with the rebbe. He had been wealthy but had fallen on hard times and needed the Rebbe’s advice and blessing. He was admitted into the rebbe’s study and as was customary at the time, he presented the rebbe with a written note neatly listing all his troubles and requests. The Rebbe took the note and perused it carefully. Then he placed the note on his desk and looked up at the man in front of him. “I see that you have given much thought as to what it is that you need,” he said. “But have you ever thought about what you are needed for?” These words were not a rebuke, rather they were instructions for living. What you are needed for and what you need are bound to one another. If you fulfill that which you are needed for, you will have those things that you need. Listen carefully to the spoken and the unspoken; listen for the will, the force, the holy presence of God in your life guiding you toward your destiny, helping you discover exactly what you and only you are needed for in this world.

L'shana Tova!