

FIRST DAY OF ROSH HASHANAH

29 SEPTEMBER 2011

As I reflect on this past year, I am struck powerfully – as I am certain you must be as well – by the “tzorus” – the troubles and stresses that pound at us relentlessly from every angle. The litany of woes seems endless: 46 million Americans below the poverty line – unemployment at an alarming level, affecting many within our own community – Europe in economic free-fall – and our own political system in a constant dysfunctional logjam. In our own families, we are often beset by illness, by discord, and by diminishing horizons. Ours may be the first generation in recent memory where our children may not automatically achieve greater success than we have. It is far from easy “out there” – and yet, as we celebrate Rosh Hashanah today, we still want to follow our Jewish tradition in wishing ourselves and each other Shanah Tovah u’metukah – “a good and sweet year.”

Deep down though – we are troubled, we are scared, and we worry – understandably so – where we and our world are going. Those nagging anxieties – which are mine and I suspect yours – impel me to try and find a different approach for myself . . . and for all of us – as we experience our High Holy Day season. We may not choose to admit it even to ourselves – but we are in search – and I include myself in that quest – we are in search for hope, comfort and strength – for a force higher and

more enduring than the headlines – in sorting through the layers of confusion that beset us. That quest led me – not so surprisingly – to the Machzor, the liturgical text which is ours today.

On Rosh Hashanah, God jumps off almost every page of our Machzor: We have an image of God watching over every soul . . . at some level, even determining our destiny. “Avinu Malkenu, Our Father, our King,” we say “Inscribe us in the Book of Good Life.” Be gracious to us and answer us.”

We say the words – but do we really believe them?

For most of us, ours is not the unequivocal faith of our ancestors. Tevye could sit on the rooftops of Anatevka somewhere in Eastern Europe and talk to God. Indeed, they regularly had a conversation . . . often very animated. For Jews in earlier centuries, it was that faith in God that enabled them to persevere in the wake of disasters – personal and communal – that would be daunting for most of us.

“Ani Maamin” – I believe,” they would say – in spite – in spite of everything happening around me.

For many of us, perhaps in some measure because we live in an era of unprecedented openness and freedom, that belief in God is not axiomatic or automatic.

We may invoke God almost parenthetically – when we inject “thank God,” “God willing” or “God forbid” – into our comments, but our perception of God often remains fuzzy and ambivalent, even among those who are immersed in the rhythms and actions of Jewish life.

I start therefore with the premise that if we could -- all factors being equal -- we would want to gain some sense of God in our lives -- and that such an approach might re-charge our sorely depleted batteries -- amid the turmoil of our world.

Even in our technologically-driven culture, I am not aware -- at least to date -- of any app for our Blackberries that serves precisely that purpose.

We are not Abraham, Moses, Isaiah or Tevye, for whom God was intensely personal and direct. Therefore, our search must be "out-of-the-box" -- broad, creative, imaginative -- looking for God in ways that are accessible for us.

We might start by finding God in nature -- even in the phenomena of the almost ordinary. Just a week or so ago, I was sitting at my desk here at B'nai Israel, as the shadows lengthened outside at sunset. I lifted my head -- and lo and behold, the entire sky was streaked in pink -- which touched and colored every puffy cloud. It was more beautiful than even the

most gifted artist could capture on canvas:

"Mah rabu ma'asecha, Adonai" --

"How magnificent are your works -- O God" -- is the way the Psalmist would have put it -- but , for us the challenge is to stop and see the imprint of God that is already in our lens -- even across the parking lot of B'nai Israel.

We can find God in our work. The teacher who stands in front of students imparting not just information but values is doing God's work. The scientist laboring over the test tube or the petri dish in the battle to eradicate disease is doing God's work. The parent -- who continues day after day -- sometimes with frustrations galore --

in offering love, caring and guidance for a child – is doing God’s work. Surely, if we choose, we can find God in what we do each day.

We can also discover God in community. As individual Jews - when we join ourselves to a larger entity – whether that is a Minyan of 10 or a Synagogue of thousands, we feel a power that is stronger and greater than ours alone. When we realize that Jews are celebrating Rosh Hashanah today – not just here in Rockville but in London and Los Angeles – in Jerusalem and Johannesburg – in almost every corner of the globe – and that for thousands of years Jews have heard exactly the same shofar blasts on Rosh Hashanah – the impact of community is palpable. In linking ourselves together in community – we can accomplish wondrous goals that seemed impossible at the outset: A Jewish state can be reborn. A million Jews can leave the shackles of repression from behind an Iron Curtain for a new and better future. Surely, we can find God in the power of community.

As Jews, we also have other channels in which we can discover God. One of them is prayer. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz put it this way: “The essence of prayer is saying “Hello . . . I am here.” . . . It is like a phone call.” . . . He then adds: “But sometimes I must say more: “Please, I need a helping hand” . . . or “I am really in a tough place” . . . or “I wish you would share the view with me.” “That is the basis of prayer,” Rabbi Steinsaltz posits . . . ”the rest is just how we put it into words.”

It is impossible for most of us to intuit God every single time that we pray . . . but prayer is a discipline – and that process can lift our souls.

Dr. Louis Finkelstein, was the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary in my early days in Rabbinical School there. We all knew that “Finky”, as we called him behind his back, would get up every morning before dawn to study Talmud . . . a few uninterrupted hours before the administrative pressures of his day . . . Dr. Finkelstein’s bon mot has stayed with me in all the intervening years: “When I pray,” he would say, “I talk to God – but when I study, God talks to me.” In Judaism, our sacred texts are a conduit to God. Each Shabbat, when we publicly study the Torah, the distilled wisdom of our tradition – Parasha after Parasha – book after book – year after year – we are in God’s presence.

Nature, work, community, prayer, study . . . God is with us . . . if we do not limit God to a ritualized formula.

But there is still more . . . especially for us, as Jews.

We have a system of Mitzvot – commandments, designed to translate the abstract concepts of our tradition into tangible, specific actions. Many of our Mitzvot are rooted in our relationships with other people: I am convinced that when we visit the sick – comfort the bereaved – open our homes and our hearts to the marginalized – share our resources with those in need – God’s spirit is with us in every one of our steps.

To really be in the presence of another human being – to really be in the fullness of that moment – is to have a glimpse of God.

How do we find God? By making a difference in our world.

Hyman Bookbinder – “Bookie” – was an iconic figure in our American Jewish community. For almost two decades, he directed the office of the American Jewish

Committee here in Washington. His advocacy on behalf of many just causes: the defense of Israel, civil rights, Holocaust remembrance, Soviet Jewry, social policy – became legendary.

Hyman Bookbinder died this past July. In his memoirs, he wrote:

“If it should be true that in my lifetime I have helped even one Jew or one Haitian or one Pole escape persecution; if I have helped even one ghetto youngster escape poverty; if I have helped one daughter of a Tennessee shirt maker get to play on her own piano – if indeed these things are true – then all that is left to say is: thank God that I was given some opportunities to make life a little easier, a little sweeter, a little more secure, for some fellow human beings.”

Friends, choose your issue – choose your project – choose your cause.

God – God is also found in our awareness of both the privileges and responsibilities which are ours.

Full circle:

Yes, God is on the pages of our Machzor – but God is far beyond as well. For each of us, life – with all its frightening unavoidable, stark realities – can and should be a partnership with God.

In the New Year which stretches before us now, there are many channels to God . . . and Ani Maamin –

I truly believe – God will be eagerly waiting for us.