KOL NIDRE 2018
Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley
Rabbi Niles Goldstein

Gut Yontif, and Shanah Tovah to every one of you.

As we usher in Yom Kippur tonight, the final chapter of this year's Days of Awe, I hope that this season of repentance and renewal has been a rich and meaningful one for you.

On Rosh Hashanah, I spoke about immigration,

about Judaism's moral imperative not only to *welcome* the stranger, but to *love* that person, since we too were strangers in a strange land. The focus of

my sermon was on *external* issues -- our attitude, behavior, and policy toward refugees. But this evening, on Kol Nidre, I want to turn our focus *inward*; I want to use my words to redirect our thoughts toward a matter of *faith*, and specifically, toward what we may or may *not* think about God.

As some of you know, *I* have often sought God through extreme experiences, on mountain peaks, and in exotic lands. As a Jew, and as a congregational rabbi for most of my professional life, that can pose some serious problems. Judaism is a religious tradition where *peoplehood* is a powerful feature and a primary focus.

Consequently, there is a basic disconnect between serving as the spiritual leader of a Jewish community and being pulled so forcefully toward *solitary* adventures. I've struggled for over two decades to make peace between the call of the wild and the call of my faith.

A number of years ago, when I was the rabbi of a synagogue in Manhattan, I traveled one summer to the Faroe Islands. The Faroes are an archipelago of islands in the North Atlantic, roughly midway between Norway & Iceland. Today they are a territory of Denmark, but they were first settled by Irish monks, and then the Vikings.

The Faroes are a place of stark, raw beauty, and they are sparsely populated. I hiked over hills so verdant and misty they seemed *otherworldly*, and along sheer cliffs dotted with puffins and surrounded by grey seals and pilot whales. There was a quiet but intense spirituality that suffused the land and the sea -- it was spirituality of solitude.

I felt a *kinship* with that sense of solitude. It didn't exactly make me uplifted, but it *did* seem to speak to a part of my soul that only nature could.

When I returned to New York City at the end of the summer, one of my first tasks as a congregational rabbi was to welcome new members who had joined

our synagogue. One of them, Tonda, was a literary agent and a self-proclaimed atheist and provocateur; we instantly took a liking to each other. If we weren't discussing the ever-changing state of the publishing industry, we were talking about, and arguing over the existence of God.

Tonda's challenges to my theism were thoughtful and sound, and I offered a defense of my belief, and a critique of atheism, that she found equally compelling. I respected Tonda, and I knew she respected me.

While we both saw the validity in one another's arguments, it became increasingly clear as time went

on that neither of us was going to *budge* from our fundamental positions, which raised a larger question for me: What is, or *ought* to be, my job as a rabbi within the context of a spiritual community? Should my conversations, teachings, and sermons be devoted to promoting belief in a higher power?

I eventually came to see the folly of my mission,

how I'd misunderstood the true nature of my work as a spiritual leader. I'd been so busy debating and arguing with Tonda about God's existence that I'd hidden from myself the fact that our engagement *itself* was spiritual. The distance between the two of

us was not vast, and our separation was mostly illusory.

I respected, even *loved* Tonda, and I saw the divine image that was within her -- even if she adamantly denied its existence. Tonda and I had formed a sacred connection, an *I-thou* relationship. It wasn't the spirituality of solitude that I'd experienced in the Faroe Islands -- it was a spirituality of a completely different order. Despite the *surface* divide between us, we were bound by a faith tradition anchored in *dialogue* rather than dogma;

by an *iconoclastic* impulse to overturn decorum

in pursuit of knowledge and wisdom; by an embrace of *pluralism and* a commitment to community, even

if some of our beliefs and perspectives differed in significant ways.

Ever since my experience with Tonda in New York,

I have tried to understand “Torah” in its most expansive sense, as an impassioned and *communal* search for meaning and purpose. I have tried to become more tolerant and open, not only to divergent opinions, but also to the presence and involvement of other people on my spiritual path -- to see them not as threats to my personal privacy,

but as *assets* to my inner growth.

When I succeed -- and it is not easy -- I am often reminded of a verse from *Pirke Avot*, a teaching that says far more about *relationships* than about mountaintops or far-off lands: “When two people sit together and exchange words of Torah, then the divine presence sits with them as well.” But what happens when we do *not* feel that God is sitting with us? What if neither relationships nor nature lead to an experience of the presence of the divine? How are we supposed to feel when everything in our lives seems to suggest just the *opposite* of God being present? If you can relate to this feeling, you are not alone: people have experienced what they perceive as God’s *absence* since ancient times. The author of

Psalm 22 himself asks the question, a question repeated verbatim by Jesus as he dies on the cross: *Eli, Eli, lamah sabachtani* -- "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?"

This question, in my view, is suggestive of a profound theological idea in Judaism: *hester panim*, the "hiding" of God's face. This concept traces back to a scene at the end of the book of Deuteronomy.

Moses is in his final days; in addition to preparing for his death and appointing Joshua as his successor, Moses listens to God's description

of the future of his people. It's a troubling prophecy about idolatry, ingratitude, and mutual abandonment:

“The Lord said to Moses: ‘You are soon to lie with your fathers. This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst, in the land that they are about to enter; they will forsake Me and break My covenant that I made with them. Then My anger will flare up against them, and *I will abandon them and hide My countenance from them*.’”

The expression “hide My countenance” is found nowhere else in the Torah, but it does appear in several other places in the Hebrew Bible. Just as Israel’s experience of slavery in Egypt becomes a *metaphor* for bondage and oppression more generally in later Jewish thought and liturgy,

so, does this vision of God's detachment and separation from Israel become a reference point,

and a dark recurring motif, in later religious literature. But what exactly does it *mean?* There are a number of ways of interpreting the idea of *hester panim*, the hiding of God's face. In our own time, *hester panim* could be viewed as *any* experience that suggests God's absence, such as severe illness, natural disaster, poverty, famine, war, or any other horrific event that, for some, shows how God has gone AWOL. In biblical times, *hester panim* was construed as divine punishment, as an act of retribution by God for our sins. If your crops failed to grow, if a town was flooded, if an enemy invaded

your land, it was seen by our forbears as a kind of cosmic "payback" for their misdeeds.

God establishes a special bond with the Israelites

at Mount Sinai, but the terms of that covenantal relationship are *conditional*. If the people of Israel are not faithful to God, God will become angry, and God will *withdraw* the divine countenance from them, *as well as* the divine protection that had previously kept them safe from danger, injury, and harm.

While it may strike most of us here as primitive,

there are still people who believe in this idea.

I have personally encountered Jews from Skokie to Samarkand who have tried to explain the horrors of the Holocaust, for example, using this biblical world view: God *withheld* protection from European Jews because many of them were assimilationist; because they were non-observant.

because the parchment inside their *mezuzahs* wasn't kosher. God did not "cause" the Holocaust, but, by not intervening, God *allowed* it to occur.

To me, this is not an acceptable explanation for why there is pain and suffering in our world. But there is a second way of interpreting the idea of

hester panim that is more compelling, one that makes us, not God, ultimately responsible for the hardships and loneliness we often experience in our lives. When bad things happen to us, they are not an expression of divine punishment – they are, instead, a result of our own misbehavior.

While this interpretation still embraces the concept of a covenantal relationship between God

and humanity, it claims that *we* are the ones who distance ourselves from God, not the other way around. When we transgress, when we are unfaithful to the covenant, that bond -- as in a marriage -- will be broken.

Yet God does not turn away from us -- *we* turn away from God. The detachment and separation we feel are *our* responsibility, and ours alone. God does not "hide" from us; *we* shut God out, or let God in, depending on our own behavior and moral character. While I find this view problematic as well, it is at least not as archaic, and downright offensive, as the biblical conception.

There is a third way of interpreting *hester panim*, one that is linked, not to behavior, but to *perception*. The omniscient and omnipotent God of religious tradition is also usually thought of as omni*present* -- *God* never "hides" at all. What *does* get clouded, or

at times blinded, is only our *perception* of God's presence. We may not be able to see God

through the shadows and fog of the human condition, but that does not mean that God is not there.

In chapter 28 of the book of Genesis, the patriarch Jacob is in a very dark place. He is on the run from his brother Esau's wrath, after having stolen both his birthright and their father's blessing. Jacob is afraid and alone; God has been absent from the narrative for almost three chapters, and Jacob surely perceives, from his life as well. Overwhelmed with anxiety and a sense of desolation, Jacob places a *stone* under his head as a pillow, falls asleep one night and has a dream.

He sees a ladder that reaches from the earth to the heavens, with angels climbing up and down the ladder. In the dream, God stands next to Jacob,

and assures him that he will not be abandoned:

“Remember,” God says, “I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.”

While Jacob doesn’t verbalize his fears or his sense of being forsaken by God, these words suggest that God is well aware of Jacob’s existential condition.

God’s promise of presence and protection offers the patriarch reassurance that God is and will be with him -- always.

After this experience, Jacob has an epiphany:

"Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!'" Shaken, he said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven."

Jacob's dream, ironically, "wakes" him to God's presence in his life, despite the darkness. The shaken Jacob concedes his blindness and gains a fresh perception of reality -- his eyes are now open.

When Jacob acknowledges that God was never truly "hidden," when the illusion of God's absence is

shattered, Jacob is ready to continue on his journey and become the next great leader of his people.

The experience of *hester panim* is connected

to who we are and the way we view the world.

While God's absence may be the result of our own misperception, that perception can be changed.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, an important Hasidic master, asks the question: Where is God to be found?" He then provides an answer: "In those places where God is given entry." The Kotsker Rebbe continues: "One who does not see the Omnipresent in *every* place will not see God in *any* place."

Whether or not God is present in our lives is ultimately up to us. The paradox of a transcendent Deity is that even as God is “hidden” from the world, God is present everywhere in it. If we cannot feel God, it is because we are not *open* and *humble* enough for God to enter our hearts and souls.

If we cannot see God, it is not because we are looking in the wrong places, but because we are not looking with correct *vision*.

The Days of Awe, and Yom Kippur in particular,

teach us that we are not alone -- we have traditions, we have community, and we have a relationship with

God. If we are ready and receptive, if we are sufficiently evolved to treat our feeling of separation from God as *impermanent*, as a consequence of our own misdeeds and misperception, then the possibility of inner growth,

the *opportunities* for reconciliation and renewal,

are profound.

May this new Jewish year grant us vision and insight into ourselves, so that we might find the divine within one another and throughout our lives.

May *all* of our experiences -- our triumphs *as well as* our challenges -- serve as catalysts for transformation, and lead us to more depth, more

fulfillment, and more *holiness* than we have ever known.

Ken Yehi Ratzon – May it be God's will.