

Kol Nidre 5782  
In Our Faith, We Live  
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I always feel like Kol Nidre is a good night for stories. After all, we join God in opening our Book of Life and perusing the pages of last year's chapters. So, let me begin with a parable by Israel's Nobel laureate Shai Agnon. The story is called "To Father's House," and while it takes place in the old country during the Passover season, it is really a tale about us, in this place and at this time.

Once, there was a writer who was interrupted by painters who had come to white wash his apartment. The writer would have to pause his writing and leave the apartment for a few days so that the painters could complete their work. Having nothing to do and no obligations, the man decided that he would return to his home town and see his father, whom he had not seen in many years. It was also the day before Passover, a perfect time to go.

The writer, a very modern, secular man, boarded the train and arrived just as sun sank and Pesach began. The writer went straight to the synagogue hoping to find his father, but the evening prayers had ended. His father would be home by now, so the writer set out on foot for his father's home. But he could not remember the way. He walked by streets and houses that looked familiar, but he could not find the right street or the right house.

Then, as if out of thin air, a girl in a red dress appeared. She did not speak, but merely pointed to a house. The writer looked up and there was his father, in the window, raising the kiddush cup to make the blessing. At that moment, the clouds opened like a torn sheet and the full moon shone on his father's face.

Like all good allegories, there is a mysterious, even mystical quality to the story. The silent girl who points the way to the father's house, and the moon that offers it celestial spot light underscore just how lost the writer has become. He has no idea how to find his home.

Even though, the story takes place on Pesach, it equally applies to the High Holidays. We are all trying to find our way home. And like the writer, we are all very comfortable in our secular world, often more conversant in its language of higher education, professional achievement, and navigating the American dream than we are at home in our own Jewish tradition. And like the writer's apartment, Yom Kippur comes to wash us clean and initiate our return. We have been compelled to leave the comfort of our secular homes and find our place in the traditional prayers and themes of these holiest days of our year. We come here at this time of year hoping to "see the light." But in many ways, the power of this day only works when it is an extension of all of our other days, if it is consistent with how we live each day.

On Erev Rosh Hashanah, as we ushered into the High Holiday season, Rabbi Karen taught us that the *Shehecheyanu* blessing asks three questions. What allows us to fully live? What sustains us? And what enables us to reach each day? I shared with you that faith, hope, and gratitude that can allow us to fully live. This Kol Nidre, I submit that it is religion that can sustain us. The prophet declares, "Tzadik B'Emunato yicheyeh – A righteous person will live in

faith. (Hab. 2:4)” One way we can understand the word faith, is religion, the practices that express yearnings for holiness and for a sense of wholeness. Remember, *Emunah* – faith in Hebrew - is comprised of the Hebrew root that means practice, consistency, artfulness. Religion helps us to become skilled in navigating the ultimate questions of meaning.

The modern rabbi who speaks of the religious impetus in each of us is the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosopher-poet Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel. He drills down to the marrow of our essential need that gets drowned out in the din of everything else. He writes, “It is man’s very existence that stands in relation to God. Man’s relation to state, society, family etc., do not penetrate all strata of his personality. In his final solitude, in the hour of approaching death, they are blown away like chaff. It is in the dimension of the holy that he abides whatever befalls him. (*Man is Not Alone* p. 238).”

In the ultimate moment, when everything gets stripped away, we confront the ultimate questions. Do we have the tools to answer? Are we attuned to dwelling in the holy? Where else do we practice, if not in life. Throughout my career as a rabbi, I have consistently seen the desire for religion surrounding death. When a loved one dies, family members always want to know what they are supposed to do. From the burial, to shiva, to saying kaddish we seek forms and structures to bolster us. The prayers, receiving the community in the home (or on zoom), shiva, the first 7 days after burial, sheloshim, the first 30 days after burial, yartzheit. These escort us from one period to the next.

During this uncertain time of pandemic, when we have seen death and suffering so prevalent in our world, religion can be a response. Judaism can help us to order our lives and bring structure to the questions and challenges that might overwhelm us. It anchors us in a consistency of focus – purposeful living, sensitivity to holiness, relationship with God and one another.

While our tradition is always there for us, if we only turn to religion in times of crises, it will not fully be able to sustain us. Too often for those of us who mainly inhabit a secular world, religion is just another hobby to fit in. We check the box of doing religion in its discrete place and time – if we can pencil it in. Like the writer who could not find his father’s house because he so rarely returned home, we miss the sustaining nature of religion when practice is random or sporadic. We become lost on the way to tradition if we have not worn a path of practice through the forest of the year. This is not to say that we don’t have spiritual feelings or impulses toward transcendence, it is just that religion can help us make those moments regular.

Popular thinker and journalist Malcom Gladwell talks about committing 10,000 hours of practice in order to gain proficiency in something. The same can be said about becoming adept in religion. Like going to the gym, practicing an instrument, learning a language, becoming a professional - for religion to work it takes practice and commitment. And like all of these things, we don’t always feel like practicing. But the commitment and consistency helps us get through the ruts. If we stay the course, we slowly begin to reap the benefits.

One of the most religious things that occurs at Temple Beth David is the Thursday lunch time Talmud class. We have been meeting now for a little over two years with a core of about

12-15 consistent learners. When I say it is religious, it is not for the obvious reasons. Clearly, Talmud Torah – learning - is a mitzvah. The Talmud class is religious because we do it *religiously* on Thursdays. Participants make room in their day, and we commit to carving out time together. It is not always easy. I am sure that members of the class might not always feel like attending. There can be hectic days when we ask how we even have time to come study. I know I feel like that sometimes and I'm the rabbi and teacher! In the spirit of Yom Kippur honesty, I don't always feel like taking the time away from emails, phone calls, and the long list of things that seem urgent. But no matter what the day holds, when it is my turn to teach I show up. No matter what my state of mind going in to Talmud, I always come out feeling elevated and enlightened. Without fail the participants in the class share perspectives and ask questions that teach me, leading me to deeper insight and understanding. In committing to one another and the text, Thursday at noon allows me to have a regular encounter with God. As it is said, when two or more study Torah together, the *Shechinah*, the Divine presence rests among them. It is the commitment, simply being present, engaging in consistent acts that leads to a sustaining religious life.

Judaism is a religion without catechism. It is light on dogma, but the one fundamental dogma that we declare distills Jewish faith to its very essence. *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* – Listen deeply, Israel, the Unity in all Life is our God, all existence is Connection. Jewish religion presents a structure that mirrors our sense of connection in the world. Heschel reflects that Jewish living is not about the isolated performance of a good deed here or there. He writes, “Jewish living [is]... the state of being committed to the task, of belonging to an order in which single deeds, aggregates of religious feeling, sporadic sentiments, moral episodes become parts of a complete pattern (*Man is Not Alone* p. 270).” When we plug into the rhythms and cycles of Jewish living we create patterns in our life that reflect God. We create unity.

The fact is that there is not just one way to get back to father's house. Our traditions need not look exactly like his traditions, but our commitment needs to be just as serious and sincere. Judaism offers for us opportunities each day, each week, each season to live in our faith – to say *Shema* when we awake and go to sleep, to offer a simple blessing for the food we eat, to make Shabbat regular, both here at synagogue – making minyan and time for prayer, and at home with candles, challah and wine, time for rest, to time set aside phones and work, holidays and festivals. Like the writer, it is so easy to make excuses and not return home. There are so many other things to do and that are worthy of our attention. But if we want to transcend and have a little taste of eternal time, if we want to truly find sustenance, and resilience we need to return to our religion and orient our lives accordingly.

I started with a story, told from the perspective of the son, the writer. Reluctantly and with uncertainty he fumbled his way toward home. I wonder what the father thought. All of those holidays, all of those Shabbat evenings without his son. We can imagine that he wondered when his son would return. Heschel's magnum opus of Jewish philosophy, *God in Search of Man*, speaks to this allegory. God, too, wonders when we will come home.

So allow me to end with another story. It is a poem by Rabbi Margret Wenig. She pictures God as a parent, a Mother waiting for us to return. We just need to take the first step and She will be there. Jewish religious practice is the step toward Her. She will sustain us and give us life.

God is home tonight turning the pages of her book, Wenig begins. "Come home," she wants to say to us, "Come home," but she won't call for she is afraid we will say no. She can anticipate the conversation. "We are so busy," we'd apologize. "We'd love to see you but we just can't come home tonight. Too much to do." Even if we don't realize it, God knows that it is just an excuse. She knows that we avoid returning to her because we don't want to look into her age-worn face. She understands that it is hard for us to face a God who disappointed our childhood expectations: She did not give us everything we wanted, She did not make us triumphant in battle, successful in business and invulnerable to pain. We avoid going home to protect ourselves from our disappointment and to protect her. We don't want her to see the disappointment in our eyes. God knows it is there and she would have us come home anyway....She ushers us into her kitchen, seats us at her table. Then she pushes back her chair and says, "Let me have a good look at you." In a single glance, God sees our birth, our death and all the years in between. She sees us when we were young, when we thought there was nothing we could not do. She sees our middle years...when we cooked and cleaned, cared for children, worked and volunteered; when everybody needed us and we had no time for sleep. And God see us in our later years, when we no longer felt so needed...She sees us sleeping alone in a room that once slept two. We are growing older as God is growing older. The face which time has marked looks not frail to us now, but wise. God knows those things only the passage of time can teach: that one can survive the loss of a love; that one can feel secure even in the midst of a changing world; that there can be dignity in being alive, even when every bone aches. God would prefer that we come home. She will leave the door open and the candles burning.