

“Are you there God? It’s me, Kelly”

Rosh Hashanah 5781

Almost one year ago, I was driving north to my house. It was late, I was exhausted, and in general, feeling quite depleted both physically and emotionally. I called my best friend to say hi, to check in, and find out how her day had gone. As I continued my drive, I began to sob. I couldn’t contain the tears, the frustration, the emotions. The more I spoke, the harder I cried. She then reminded me that Yom Kippur had ended just an hour or two before, so perhaps I needed to give myself some kindness, some space, and probably some sleep.

It wasn’t Yom Kippur that had made me cry. It wasn’t the intensity of the day, or from leading hours of services. It wasn’t even from fasting, because the truth is, I didn’t fast last year. It all started about a month before the High Holy Days began.

What many of you don’t know is that last fall, I suffered a miscarriage. I found out at my first doctor’s appointment that the baby was no longer alive, that I had a non-viable pregnancy. At first, I was totally shocked. And then the grief began to wash over me. How could this happen? I had a perfectly normal and easy pregnancy with Ezri, why didn’t my body know how to do this again? Why was this happening? And the biggest question of all, why was God punishing me?

I knew the statistics; I knew the reality and prevalence of miscarriage. I had held many others' hands and offered my shoulder to friends, family, congregants, even strangers who have been through this trauma and pain. I never thought it could ever happen to me. And yet, I joined billions, probably trillions of others who have endured this sorrow. And, like many of them, I was silent through this ordeal. Sure, I had support from many loving family and friends, especially from my also-grieving husband. I had amazing assistance from my incredible co-workers here at CBI. But a hole remained in my heart, a hole that made it impossible for me to share my grief with the world.

It almost felt like the silence was creating a deep anger within me. This anger was rooted in my pain and it lashed out in terrible ways. This anger unfurled itself during the most inopportune times. It was only made more vivid as I prepared for last year's Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Stress over writing sermons is normal; absolute and unbridled fury is not.

But as the holidays crept closer, the anger turned away from the incessant Austin traffic, from my daughter's refusal to listen, from the minute and insignificant irritations of everyday life, to God. Where was God for me in all of this? I pour my heart and soul out week after week in my job, I do work that hopefully brings about a more peaceful and just world, I do my best to be a partner in creation, just as human beings were supposed to. So, why wasn't God there for me? Why didn't this child come to be?

And then, Rosh Hashanah morning, we read from *Un'taneh Tokef*, a list of possible outcomes for the year to come. As soon as the words, “How many will pass away from this world, how many will be born into it; who will live and who will die?” crossed my lips, I felt a cold shudder slide down my back. It curled into my stomach, like a lead ball filled with pain, emptiness, misery, and anger. It stayed there throughout the day. It remained during the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe. And as Yom Kippur began, I knew that it wasn’t going anywhere. I mentioned earlier that I didn’t fast last year. In fact, I REFUSED to fast. God didn’t deserve my hunger, my pain; I **already** gave that to God. God didn’t even deserve my prayers. But I was here.

In the middle of the day, I had some water, some food, and I enjoyed a chocolate. I got ready for our children’s service, ready to plaster a smile on my face and lead the kids in song and prayer. We took the Torah out, had a joyful *Hakafah*, and then one very cute 3-year-old helped me put the Torah away. As he pulled the string to close the ark, a large, heavy beam from the top of the ark fell with a thud onto my arm.

It hurt very badly, but beyond the pain, I found myself in shock once again. I was physically fine, but in disbelief that had happened. Was this a sign that God did not appreciate my anger? Did my refusal to fast on this holy day create a rift between me and the Eternal? Was I once again being punished because I didn’t pray with sincerity, with *kavannah* (intention), with any love in my heart?

And so, I cried my entire ride home. I sobbed and told my best friend that I was a failure. I was broken. The grief from the past month, the physical pain of recovering, and then heavy wood falling on my arm, the emotional turmoil of leading this community in prayer when I wanted to be anywhere else overcame me. Where was God for ME?

I'm sure that some of you, maybe even many of you have felt like this in your life. I'm sure that you have questioned your relationship with God, your understanding of God, your faith and belief in God. I'm sure that a great deal of you still do. And, I'm sure that many of us have felt this more intensely over the past 6 months as our world has turned upside down. Perhaps it was a far less emotional struggle, or perhaps it was even more intense. Perhaps this struggle just began, perhaps you've been feeling this for decades. No matter where you are in your journey, know that you are not alone. Know that even rabbis, those who stand before you and preach about finding comfort and consolation in God, feel this struggle. Know that during the last 6 months, some of us have felt it so acutely we've wondered if we're actually good enough to still be a rabbi.

But you should also know that just as our relationships with other people change, so too does our relationship with God. In fact, even the God we read about in Torah changes. This morning, we read from the Akeda, a portion that describes Abraham's unflinching faith in God. Abraham is commanded to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac as a sign of his loyalty and faith, and without question, he goes through every single step to fulfill this *mitzvah*. What is most astounding about this story is not the fact that Abraham was willing to go through with this seemingly impossible ask, but because of the previous experiences Abraham had with God.

Before this narrative began, we read about Abraham pleading with God to save the people of Sodom and Gomora. Abraham attempts to bargain with God, trying over and over to save 100, 10, or even just one good person from these corrupt and sinful cities. Try as Abraham did, God still destroys every single human and building in these places.

And yet, Abraham's faith remains steadfast. He doesn't hesitate to prepare his son for sacrifice. The knife doesn't slip in his hands. It isn't until a *malach Adonai*, a messenger or angel of God calls out to stop, that Abraham halted his actions.

Perhaps Abraham's understanding of God changed during these different events? Perhaps even **God** changed during these events, even more so because this is the last time God speaks directly to Abraham? No matter how their understanding of each other changed, both Abraham and God were confronted with an evolution of their relationship during this time. And, through that change, we come to understand that God is so incredibly multi-faceted, in particular when it comes to the different names we give to God. Some of our ancient commentators explain that the names given to God, of which there are many, often refer to the different characteristics and qualities that we see in God in each occurrence.

In a Midrash dating back thousands of years, Shemot Rabbah says, "R. Abba b. Mammel said: God said to Moses: 'You wish to know My name; I am called according to My deeds. Sometimes I am called "El Shadday", "Tzveo'ot", "Elohim", "YHVH". When I judge the creations I am called "Elohim" [Judge]. When I am waging war against the wicked, I am called "Tzveo'ot" [Lord of Hosts]. When I suspend [punishment] for a man's sins I am called "El Shadday" (Almighty God). When I am merciful towards My

world, I am called "YHVH," for "YHVH" only refers to the attribute of mercy, as it is said: "The Eternal, the Eternal (YHVH, YHVH), God, merciful and gracious" (Shemot Rabbah 3:6).

The Kabbalists took this message a bit further and explained that in the story of the Akeda, when God first tells Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, God is referred to as *Elohim*. This would mean that God was judging Abraham's faith. And later, when a *Malach Adonai* (YHVH) calls out to Abraham, God extends mercy to Abraham. Even in these trying moments, different attributes of God appear.

Throughout our lives, we struggle with God. We sometimes feel completely at ease, other times filled with anger. And perhaps that is because God is showing us different attributes in those moments. Perhaps we can't even feel God's presence. Or, perhaps we continue to struggle with the belief that there really is a God, especially when so many challenges and unhappy events continue to occur. It reminds me of this quote from Exodus, the same quote mentioned in the previous Midrash:

The Eternal! The Eternal! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness, extending kindness to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin—yet not remitting all punishment, but visiting the iniquity of parents upon children and children's children, upon the third and fourth generation" (Exodus 34:6-7).

Even in Torah, God is presented to the Israelites with different tempers, varying degrees of kindness, and a broad array of traits. God is kind, and compassionate, and generous, but can and will show judgement, a seemingly merciless side. What are we to do?

As we begin another new year, a year filled with hope and potential, we can't help but think of the challenges from the past year. Do you think of God as compassionate and gracious? Or, is God punishing us? Do you believe that God has many different attributes? Or, is God actually single-faceted?

Wherever you are in your relationship, in your journey, in your beliefs, or non-beliefs, know that it's ok. It's ok to be angry with God. It's ok to lash out. It's ok to cry in frustration, to blame God. It's ok to be filled with love for God. It's ok to accept the moment you are in. It's ok to feel hurt and betrayal, and it's ok to feel supported and treasured.

I don't feel anger this year. I no longer feel like I was being punished. Only time helped me to heal. There will always be a small hole in my heart, the place where the lost baby never had a chance to exist. But my heart continues to grow each day with anticipation and excitement for what's next. My relationship with God has changed and will continue to change. I know this is true for so many as we enter this sacred time. The High Holy Days can be meaningful and uplifting for every person, no matter where you are in your personal journey. Take stock of yourself; are you satisfied? Are you still searching for something more? Do you need space? Where is God in your life? Or, is God missing? We are all a part of a spectrum of belief, of faith, of feeling, of connection. For this year, for all years, your journey and relationship to God is your own. It's holy. It changes. Sometimes, it doesn't exist. All of it matters. All of it is important. All of it is ok.

This year, Rosh Hashanah allowed me to see a new future, one that still seems uncertain, but filled with the kindness and compassion of others. People helping others, each person doing their best to be a partner in creation, that is truly God's work. That is the presence of the merciful, slow-to-anger God I know, the one I want to know. That is what gives me peace, contentedness, and joy.

May this new year be one filled with health, with sweetness, with safety, with peace. And, may we all work together to make that happen. *Ken Yehi Ratzon*, be this God's will.