

## WHEN THE SPIRIT DOESN'T MOVE YOU

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Over the years, I've observed that many of the High Holy Day sermons at Bet Mishpachah discuss the speaker's travels. With that in mind, I take you to Bridgeville, Delaware. It's at the intersection of Delaware route 404 and U.S. 13 and no, it was not my idea of an offbeat destination. Instead, it was the site of a pitstop — at a Royal Farms outlet — while returning from the beach. While Jeff, who was driving, filled the gas tank, I went into the store to stretch my legs and examined with fascination recent developments in junk food — something alien to one who does most of his food shopping at Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. In the midst of reviewing achievements in candy miniaturization, I was summoned back to the car so I could be with our dog. I then took the opportunity to read some email I had received but not opened while at the beach.

There was a message was from one of Bet Mishpachah's hard-working High Holy Day coordinators. It contained links to a 40-day High Holy Day preparation series. The author of the series, a recently-ordained rabbi who describes himself as a Jewish educator, writer, and performance artist, set forth a regimen for spiritual preparation for the High Holy Days. This encompasses engaging in a "human-spiritual task that provides a basis to 'reflect, repent, and return to center.'"

This introduction also contains a link to another message titled "Designing Your Spiritual Life" written by an individual whom the author describes as his "life coach." Click the link, and the life coach provides guidance on how to obtain spirituality. She defines spirituality as "the aspect of humanity that refers to the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature, and to the significant or sacred."

These thoughts managed to keep me alert, for once, during the typically soporific nighttime ride west on Route 404. To be honest, neither

the performance-artist rabbi nor the life coach communicated in the type of concrete, fact-based manner that I prefer. But I did realize that, as September approached, many Jews would seek the insight that these individuals seek to provide. Service leaders would prepare for what may well be the sole exposure to Judaism that many congregants receive all year. How can they provide the necessary gravitas and inspiration? Some congregants undoubtedly would engage in the process of evaluating their commitment to Judaism. They may not be satisfied checking the usual ritual boxes, and strive for deeper meaning from their High Holy Day experience. How can they receive it?

One frequent response is that the desired level of meaning, or spirituality, can be achieved by getting closer to God, and becoming more Godly. The liturgy we use certainly promotes this concept. Throughout the preceding month, our Shabbat services typically included Psalm 27, whose author in a traditional translation seeks always to dwell in the house of God and trusts that God will provide support notwithstanding being forsaken by others. And our Rosh ha-Shana liturgy, as contemporary as it is, contains God, God, and more God. During the first Shofar service, our *Machzor* tells us that “[w]e come here to build into our lives acts which respond more to the will of God than to the will of the authorities of our daily world.” The *U-n’taneh Tokef* focuses on God’s judgment and advances the notion — in much more elegant language — that it is in everyone’s self-interest to get on God’s good side. Special passages in the *Amidah* state that all creation should form a single bond in God’s will and that “true strength is found only in God’s hand.” And in the portion of the service that comes next, *Avinu Malkeinu/Imeinu Shechinateinu*, we state the desire to return to God and ask for God to be our help.

So we want God’s favorable judgment. Does that really involve getting closer to God? Or is it sufficient merely to avoid God’s wrath? The God of the Torah often does not sound especially friendly or approachable. Plagues, affliction, and death strike those whom God disdains. This God is very vividly depicted in the Torah portion that is traditionally read at many synagogues — but not Bet Mishpachah — on this second day of Rosh ha-Shana. In it, God calls Abraham and tells him to take Isaac, his favorite son, to the land of Moriah, and to offer him there as a burnt offering. Abraham complies, builds an altar, binds Isaac, and places him on the altar

over some wood. But before Abraham can incinerate his son, God calls him again, tells him not to proceed further, and expresses approval that Abraham's action evinces a fear of God. Abraham is presented a ram to sacrifice instead. This God comes across as a powerful but highly temperamental and mercurial boss. God wants your fear and obedience, and if these are not forthcoming, a very bad fate may await you. Is this a phenomenon to you want to draw closer, or one whose attention you'd rather avoid?

Much more benign is the God depicted throughout the High Holy Day liturgy. According to our *Machzor*, this God is filled with "mother-love." This is the God of the 13 attributes, which are wonderful, nurturing qualities: gracious, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and truth, merciful for 1000 generations, forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin, and pardoning the penitent. This sounds like the type of God one might want to get closer to and to know better. Only one problem: how do we know such an entity exists? There's more than ample evidence throughout history that righteousness and justice are not prevalent, and that often good people suffer while the wicked prosper. This God works as an aspirational model. But where's the proof? Why get closer to a fantasy? Is this God much different than the imaginary friends of our childhood?

Some people are romantics and mystics. The benign, aspirational God may well satisfy them. Others — and I account myself among them — will find that no manner of erudition or spiritual preparation will overrule life experiences and training that lead us to prefer the empirical, tangible, and utilitarian. What are we to do?

I would propose that not all paths to repentance or *tikkun olam* — the repair of the world — venture through the land of spirituality. Consider the Torah passage we just finished reading. In these excerpts from *va-Yakhel* and *P'kudei*, God does not play a particularly large role — especially compared to the portion we read yesterday. And God's role in the narrative is at most indirect — Moses simply states God's command that the people should contribute to and build the Tabernacle.

God may have given the command, but God didn't contribute the materials, perform the labor, or provide direction. People did — and no

miracles were needed, just purpose, competence, and good will. Yes, the text mentions the people's spirits — but it emphasizes the people's skill even more heavily. The project leader, Bezalel, is cited by the text for his skill at crafting metal and carving wood — but also for his ability at giving directions. Being a visionary was not so necessary. Coordinating with others to complete a project — presumably by using talented people effectively, recognizing their value, and not being the sole star of the show — was. (Note that there is nothing in the text about the working group having constant meetings or assemblies.) By the same token, the text commends the community members who participated in the project because they “excelled in ability, to undertake the task and carry it out.”

That's right, undertaking a task to benefit the community and executing it properly. If achieving the proper spirit, or some divine spark, enables you to do so, that's great. But achieving the spirit by itself is insufficient if it does not result in some type of action. Those who have done all the preparation to achieve spirituality and then use it to dither — or, perhaps worse, merely as a means for self-congratulation — have done nothing to help themselves or others. On the other hand, one can have a successful repentance — and a worthwhile High Holy Day experience — without any sort of spiritual or theological epiphany, even if he or she has a sense of skepticism about all the claims the liturgy makes about the wonderful attributes of God. Aspire to emulate the actions of accomplished and righteous people. Take steps to correct an undesirable character trait. Find a worthwhile project in which to engage, as did the people in today's Torah portion. Carry out and complete an actual task. Perhaps you will feel closer to God. Perhaps you won't. But you will be achieving the objectives of these Days of Repentance no matter what your theological views or your penchant for abstraction.

Our High Holy Days journeys can be unpredictable. Some are elaborately planned to arrive at an august destination. In others, a humble pit stop may take us where we really need to go. Our liturgy is intended to provide you with sufficient flexibility to allow you to set yourself on the right path, whether through the grand route of seeking the divine within you or the simple step of adding a to-do list into your smartphone. *Shana Tova.*