

# Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5781

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*Together, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.* Friends are dying. Friends are being hospitalized. I've officiated at several funerals for people who died from complications of COVID. Friends are testing positive. Friends and spouses are losing jobs, homes, financial security. *We walk through the valley of the shadow of death.* Our country is divided and angry. Protests fill our streets. The anger has triggered murder and killing and death. *Together, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death.*

In our darkest hours, we recite psalm 23, "Yea, though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, I will have no fear, for You are with me." "*Lo ira ra.* I will have no fear, for You are with me. *Ki ata imadi.*" As we gather on this particular Rosh Hashanah morning, let's take a few minutes to deliberately invite God into our lives to help us cope with our unique set of challenges this year. When we walk through The Valley, we need God's Presence. We're beginning a new year, but the challenges all around us continue unabated. My hope is that at the end of this sermon, you'll have a new, religious, spiritual tool in your toolkit to cope with the stress--and help us rise to these fearsome challenges.

*I will have no fear, for You are with me.* In this moment, at some level, we are all afraid. And so, God, where are You? Allay our fears!

If you asked Kotzker Rebbe, "Where is God?" The Rebbe would respond, "God is where you invite God in." How can we invite God's presence into our lives while we're relentlessly dealing with huge, national, global issues--one after another. How are we going to connect with God/spirit/our higher selves, when we're feeling boxed in and stressed out all the time?

Maslow created a theory of the Hierarchy of Needs, built in the shape of a pyramid. The idea is that you need a strong, secure, healthy base before you can build the pyramid up higher. Our basic needs are physiological needs: food, water, a bed. Then comes psychological needs: security and safety. That's where we're stuck. Our world is filled with uncertainty, distrust, insecurity...That's where a lot of us are getting tripped up right now – down at basecamp; we can't climb up the pyramid when our foundation is shaky. Our present is unbelievable and sometimes unrecognizable, and our future is impossibly uncertain. **When we're so focused on points lower on the pyramid like physical safety, emotional safety, and financial stability, how are we going to get to the sacred work of Rosh Hashanah?**

Luckily, I can show you how. Lucky for you, you've got a great rabbi, and even during a pandemic, I can help you invite God into your life--to allay our fear, inspire our hope, and improve our coping skills. Let's begin with some prayer wisdom from Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a master at inviting God in.

Abraham Joshua Heschel writes, "The focus of prayer is not the self." For years, contemporary rabbis have been teaching that prayer is about self-reflection. But Heschel argues, "A person may spend hours meditating about himself, or be stirred by the deepest sympathy for his fellow, and no prayer will come to pass...It is the momentary *disregard* of one's personal concerns, the *absence* of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feelings become prayer in a moment in which one forgets oneself and becomes aware of God." For Heschel, that's prayer. That moment. We don't want to stay in that cosmic connection for too long, otherwise we'll lose our mooring. We want the powerful, transformative energy that ironically comes from a brief, instantaneous acknowledgement of God's Holy Presence.

Rabbi Heschel gives the example of the *motzi* blessing that we recite over the challah. How does an acknowledgement of gratitude become a sacred act? When does this recitation become a blessing? Before we eat, we might recognize our hunger. That's an acknowledgement. We may appreciate the bread. That's a recitation. We may give thanks to the farmer, the trucker, and the grocer. Still a recitation. We can praise the sun and earth and soil and the rain. Still an acknowledgement. When do the words of the *motzi* become a sacred blessing? When we're reciting the blessing and, just for a split second, we become aware of God. When we acknowledge the existence of an energy force or cosmic being or unity or source that exists beyond human effort and energy. That's when a recitation becomes a sacred blessing. That's when God is with us. In the fleeting moment of Divine awareness. For Heschel, that's the definition of a religious moment. For Heschel, in order for our prayers to be religiously significant, we have to have a brief moment in God's presence.

For some, that comes easily. I've spoken with many of you who have genuine, close relationships with God. For others, a brief moment in God's presence is a serious challenge. We ask ourselves, "What is God? Who is God? Why should I believe in God?" For most people, it's not so simple. Here's the challenge: to enter into a genuine relationship with God. When we enter into genuine relationship with God, we will be better equipped to address issues that sometimes paralyze us with fear.

*I will have no fear. Lo ira ra. I will have no fear, for You are with Me. Ki ata imadi.*

Entering into a relationship with God can be a lot like entering into a relationship with a human being. And one of the best ways I like to get to know people is to find out what they love. I like to find out what people are passionate about. Me? I love my wife Vicki, I love my kids, I love Judaism, I love my job, I love teamwork, I love music, I love basketball. What do *you* love? If you really want to get to know someone, find out what they love. The same is true when we want to get to know God--when we want to invite God into our lives, we need to get to know God. What does God love?

The prophet Jeremiah writes, what does God love? Three things: "chessed, mishpat and tzedakah".

**Jeremiah 9:23** I am the LORD who exercises loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness--for in these things I delight.

יְבֹאֲלֶה חֶפְצָתִי - אֲנִי יְהוָה, עֲשֵׂה חֶסֶד מְשֻׁפֵּט וְצִדְקָה בְּאֶרֶץ

Our tradition reveals God's character to us through the Torah. God created the world. God took us out of Egypt. God gave us the Torah and sustains the world. That's God's professional work resume: Universe Creator, Slave Redeemer, Torah Giver, World Sustainer...that's God's professional resume. But you can't *really* get to know someone by their resume. Those are words on a page. If you really want to get to know God, understand that God loves watching us when we're doing three things: performing kind deeds for each other, working for justice, and trying to behave righteously. God does *not* love it when we *talk* about kindness or *sing* about justice. God does *not* love it when we ritualize these concepts into prayer or sacrifices. God does *not* even love it when we feel these concepts in our soul or when we resolve to do these things. In the haftarah for Yom Kippur, the prophet Isaiah informs us that God doesn't really love our fasting nor our rituals; God loves when we **act our values out** in the world. God loves it when we feed the hungry, help a friend, visit the sick, support the oppressed, call our parents--*that's* what God loves, when we're actively doing these things. Now we know God a little bit better.

**Chessed.** Loving-kindness should define our relationships with others. All year round, Judaism recommends a balanced relationship with our loved ones: a balance of *chessed* and *din*, a balance of unconditional love and boundary setting. But God really loves it when we lean toward loving-kindness. So, on Rosh Hashanah, we pray that God's unconditional, covenantal love will overpower God's judgement. That *chessed* will overpower *din*--and so it should be with us. Rabbi Artson points out the curiosity that the King James Bible translation of the Hebrew word 'chessed' requires two English words – loving-kindness. Love *and* kindness? Which one is it? Love or kindness? It's both. There is no single word in English that comes close to capturing its meaning. Chessed is specifically expressing our love through acts of kindness. When we interact with others with loving-kindness, God loves it. That's how we invite God into our lives.

**Mishpat.** Justice should define our relationship with the world. Justice is epitomized by the *shofet*, who is called upon to judge with fairness. Rabbi Artson teaches that the symbol of justice is the scales, which is the instrument that measures equality. A just society is one in which every member has equal opportunity--where everyone has a fair shot. Many of us believe that we have long way to go on the march toward full equality. When we're out in the world, engaging in civil discourse, fulfilling our civic responsibilities, God loves it. That's how we invite God into our lives.

**Tzedaka.** Righteousness should define our relationship with our selves. Righteousness is epitomized by the *tzadik* who is careful to live up to the highest moral code and ethical character. The Torah writes about tzedakah, "When you see your brother lying on the street, and you hear him ask for help, do not close your heart"--hear his cry. That's what tzedakah is

about: sharpening our sensitivity and responding to the calls for help around us. When we're out there in the world, embodying the highest aspirations that we set for ourselves, God loves it. That's how we invite God into our lives.

So, for all of us, and especially those *without* a close relationship with God, here's how to invite the Presence of God into your life. When we're out there in the world and we see people exercising loving-kindness, justice work, and personal ethics, that's when God lights up.

*Ribono Shel Olam*, be with us. These are painful and dark times. Together, we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Be with us. Our country is reckoning, our bodies are sick, our psyche is fragile...we are afraid. My community, the people of Brith Shalom, and I, its representative, hereby invite You, Adonai, *Shekhina*, to be present in our lives. Help us know You as You know us. Today, on Rosh Hashanah we will plan, and then this week we will do. We will exercise our acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness. We know that You delight in our actions. We know that you will enter our lives when we acknowledge You with sincerity: *l'chol asher yikr'u b'emet*. All you desire is a moment of heartfelt acknowledgement: *rachmana liba ba'eh*. God, You desire the heart.

Today, we plan and this week we perform acts of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness. And in that way, we'll expand our coping skills under the wings of Your Divine Presence. *Lo ira ra ki ata imadi*, *May we have no fear, for You are with us*. And together we say: Amen.