

**It is Good to Give Thanks to God:**  
**Why am I Here? A Meditation for the Eve of Yom Kippur**  
**Rabbi Neil Cooper, Kol Nidre 5775**

*Tov LiHodot Ladonai U'Lizamer L'shimcha 'Elyon*  
It is good to give thanks to God and to praise Your exalted name

Adam and Eve were hiding. Eve had enticed Adam to eat fruit from the forbidden tree. And he did. And so they hid. Why did they hide? One might assume that they hid because they were fearful of the consequences of their disobedience. Adam and Eve hid, hoping to avoid God's notice and God's anger.

I would like to suggest another possibility. Adam and Eve hid because they did not know where to go. If they hid out of fear, perhaps it was the fear of not knowing where to go. They sensed that things were changing, that their brazen act closed a door. But it opened one as well. Now there was something called the future and the thoughts of the future that might await them were both exciting and frightening.

When God spoke to Adam and Eve in the Garden, He asked a seemingly simple question: "Ayeka/Where are you?" God was not asking for their geographic location. Rather, God's simple question was deep and poignant, not one to be answered as much as pondered. God asked: "Ayeka/Where are you?" And, in this question, God is saying: In order to think about the future, you must start from where you are. If you know where you are, if you know how you have arrived at this moment, you can then begin to set your course for the future. The future, you see, must be rooted in the present.

When God asked: "Ayeka?" He spoke not only to Adam and Eve. This is the question that is posed to each of us, a question we must consider on Yom Kippur, a day that there are more questions than answers: Where have we come to? How did we arrive? Why am I here? As was the case in the Garden of Eden, we may not yet be able to answer these questions. But, ultimately, these are the questions to be pondered as we set a course for the year ahead. We know how we got to this point and to this place. We cannot know for sure what the future holds. But still, we can plan and hope.

Personally, I approach this day of fasting and prayer by asking myself these questions, as well: Why am I here? How can what transpires at this moment help me to plot my course for the future? And here is where I begin.

Beyond the obvious answer (specifically, I am here to lead these services) what is it that draws me here in a more existential, rather than professional, way? What do I hope to glean from these services and from the prayers that begin this evening and continue for another 24 hours?

The prayers we recite are beautiful and rich in imagery. Included in them are expressions and articulations of many of the thoughts we should consider today. Today we confess. We beat

our chests and acknowledge our shortcomings. And, to be honest, I love all of this: the elegant Hebrew, the stirring images, even the ones that frighten us. I love the poetry. (I also remain deeply impressed by much of what we read, not the least of which is the fact that the Jewish People knows how to transgress in alphabetical order). I love the tunes, the chest-beating and the reenactments of ancient practices. But none of this answers the question: Why am I here? The answer to that question, for me, has several parts to it and begins with the song I was singing: *Tov Lihodot L'adonai* /It is good to give thanks to God.

The words of the song are taken from the beginning of Psalm 92. This is the psalm that we read every Shabbat, the Psalm/Song for the Sabbath. Generally, on Yom Kippur we do not recite this psalm. However, since Yom Kippur and Shabbat coincide this year, we read this psalm today. The words are simple: *It is good to give thanks to God and to praise your exalted name*. It is the message and meaning of this song that creates the force that pulls me to this place. And to explain this force that draws me in, I leave the story of Adam and Eve and move forward to the story of our ancestors, to the seminal moment in our People's history, after the Children of Israel had left Egypt, when our ancestors were preparing to receive the Torah from God at Sinai.

It is hard to imagine the excitement, the anxiety that gripped the Children of Israel during the three days of preparations prior to receiving the Law at Sinai. Neither Moses nor the Children of Israel had any idea what would occur. They had very little knowledge of this invisible God who took them out from Egypt and split the sea so that they could all pass through. They knew that this God had great power, but that was it.

After three days of spiritual preparation had been completed, Moses summoned the people to assemble at pre-assigned places at the foot of Mount Sinai, waiting to hear the voice of God. And the Torah tells us that God's voice was heard above the sounds of crashing lightning and booming thunder, speaking words of the commandments from the midst of a thick cloud that covered the mountain.

Responding to this scene, our Sages tell us that, after hearing only the first two of the Ten Commandments, the people could endure no more. The voice was too loud, too bold and so powerful that they feared that the Voice alone would kill them. They begged Moses to save them. They asked him to intercede on their behalf to ask God to stop speaking and, instead, give the commandments to Moses who would then, in turn, give them to the People. After the second commandment, therefore, God spoke only to Moses. But those first two had special significance to God. They are two sides of the same coin.

The first commandment says: I am God. I am the God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the one who created the world. I am **that** God. And the second says, essentially, there can be no gods other than me. No statues to bow to. No idols to pray to. You may not create other gods because, when you make a god, an idol or a statue, your creation is just that: a human creation. When you create these works and worship them, you are not worshipping

some far-away god. You are praying to your own creations. When you create gods, you worship yourself. You become God.

God would say it this way, I think:

*I know that there are a lot of rules, but I am going to give you the most important two Myself. Moses can give you the rest. The two I give to you directly are:*

*( 1.) I am God and*

*( 2.) you are not.*

*I know human nature, says God. I know what you want and what you will do to get it. And because I know you so well, your strengths and your weaknesses, I know which commandments you must hear and internalize. And, since I cannot give them to you, all of them, directly, these are the two most important rules I can give to you (for now). It all stems from here.*

Religion can be understood as an organized attempt to help you keep your ego under control. We think that we know best, that we are self-sufficient, that we can do it all. But the problem is we can't. It is as if God is saying to us: You will be a better person if you limit that part of yourself that keeps whispering in your ear about how great you are and about how you can do anything. And, the best way to do that is to acknowledge that, as important as you are, there is something bigger, something even more important than you. I don't care what you call it. Call it God, "Higher Power," "Life Force," it really doesn't matter. The purpose of giving you the Torah and all of those commandments is to remind you, first and foremost, that you are not God.

This is where the first part of my personal search has led me. I have asked the question: Why am I here? And this is the first part of my answer. I am here to remind myself that neither I, nor any of us, is God. We have, within our own small sphere of influence the ability to do all kinds of things. In our own world, we do have power accomplish feats that would have been considered miracles in times gone by. But, still, we are not all powerful. We are not limitless in our capacities to inspire others to live with kindness and compassion. We do not possess the power to create a world. Our time on earth is relatively brief. We are not Gods.

I think that we know this intellectually, but we resist it practically. We will accept that there is (maybe) a God so long as God doesn't get in our way or impose requirements upon us which may cause inconvenience.

I come to this day to remind me that there is a God, a supreme, supernal Being more important than I, more powerful than I. I come here today to acknowledge my own limited capacities and the dangers of an ego that, at times, can get out of control. In short, I come to remind myself that **God is God and I am not**. That is #1.

#2. I come today, as well, to count blessings. I believe that one of the greatest sins we can commit is the sin of taking things for granted.

A member of our community had a stroke. He has recovered physically from the ordeal. But his mental capacity has been seriously diminished. He has some memory, but not much. His impairments are not so severe, however, that he is unaware of his deficits. He knows that he can't concentrate and can no longer read a book. He can't always remember names or dates. When he needs something he can't remember it is that he wants. Actually, his doctors are not certain whether the problem that he can't remember what that "thing" is or, perhaps, is it that he knows what it is but cannot retrieve the word he wants? He is very frustrated.

Have you ever thought to thank God for the fact that your memory is, more or less, intact? That your brain still functions properly (+/-)? (And, in answering that question of thanking God for your memory, don't tell me that you can't recall). And now, when I can't remember something, instead of getting angry, I try to thank God for the memory that I have.

If you have ever visited someone in the hospital who is having problems with their digestive system, you begin to realize how wonderful it is that we can eat, digest and expel what we have ingested. Did you know that we have a prayer of thanksgiving, included in every siddur, expressing gratitude for the fact that our bodies work as they should?

Another of our members broke bones in both legs. She certainly does not take her recovery and her ability to walk for granted. Do you thank God for the fact that you can walk?

The second reason I am here is to try to remember the small miracles (that are really not so small), the health of children, the birth of grandchildren and the love I experience in my life. I try to remember to thank God for these blessings. I am here to remind me that, for me, things like memory, or walking or even mundane bodily functions basically work the way they should. Neither you nor I deserve what we have. We did nothing to deserve these things as the rewards we deserve. And, equally as important, when we or others suffer hardships, we must remember that neither we nor they deserve to suffer. The pain and hardships of life are not punishments.

A member of our congregation came to see me with a question: I have not committed any of the sins for which we repent on Yom Kippur and yet my life is a mess. Where is the justice? We spoke for quite a while about her life. I tried to be of some comfort. That was not the time for a theological discussion. But the answer that I would have liked to convey would have pointed out that the world does not function according to our standards of what is fair and not fair.

There are people who believe that if a tree falls on their house, it must be because they deserved a punishment. I prefer to point out that, if you have a rotten tree near your house, you should cut it down rather than waiting to see if God thinks that you deserve to be punished. The only punishment that the tree falling on the house represents is that the owner neglected to cut it down before it fell. Trees don't fall this way or that, depending on what home resides people with more sins.

Rabbi Harold Kushner once made a similar point about life being unfair. He said that expecting the world to be fair is like expecting the bull not to charge because you are a vegetarian! Trees fall because trees are subject to the laws of nature. When wood rots, when wind blows, when the ground shakes, trees can fall.

We know that the cell in the body of our friend, that mutated and turned into cancer, might have developed in us as well. And it didn't. We should express gratitude for the health we enjoy. And our friend who is stricken with cancer can be grateful that she lives in an age that there is an effective treatment for that cancer. What a *bracha* to live at a time when many diseases, previously death sentences, are now treatable and curable.

This is the second reason I am here. To stand, in the midst of my friends and my community to remind myself not to take any of the blessings, including you, for granted, to give thanks for all of the blessings in my life. I am here to express gratitude.

The third reason I am here is to sing. Feeling grateful and giving thanks comes, in part, from the heart. The only way I know to express simultaneously what is in my heart and what is in my head is through singing. Singing, for me, unites the service of the heart with spirit of the soul. Song, for me, gives expression to wordless emotions, to feelings and memories I cherish. I am here today to sing.

I am also here because you are here, because I need to know that I am not alone, that my voice is part of a larger choir. As I pray, sing, and listen, I am strengthened and comforted by your voices. But I am strengthened and comforted even more by your presence.

Among the soldiers of the IDF, there is a group of soldiers known as *Chayalim Bodedim*, Lone Soldiers. Some of this cohort come from broken families with which the soldier has little or no contact. But most *Chayalim Bodedim* have come from elsewhere to live in Israel, serve in the army and to make Aliyah. But being in Israel without a home to which you can return, without a family to support you is tough. My son, Yonatan, was a *Chayal Boded* and I know, first hand, the difficulties of that situation. *Chayalim Bodedim* are, therefore supported by everyone in Israel: families invite them, open their homes, give them a place to rest for the weekend (and they do the laundry for the soldier). But what happens when a *Chayal Boded* is killed?

Jordan Bensemhoun, 22 years old, had immigrated to Israel from his native Lyon in France. He was 16 then. Now served in the elite Golani infantry brigade. Jordan was killed in action in Gaza on Sunday, July 22. He was killed when the vehicle he was travelling in was hit by an anti-tank missile. His parents flew in from France for his funeral that was to be held in Ashkelon, his adoptive hometown in Israel, the city where the family who took him in lived.

But, because Ashkelon is close to Gaza and well within the range of the Hamas rockets, the Army asked that only those who knew Jordan attend the funeral. For security reasons they did not want a large gathering. Neither the army nor Jordan's family were overly concerned about lots

of people attending. After all, he was a *Chayal Boded* -- he had no family here, only a few friends – how many people would come anyway?

6,000 people showed up for Jordan Bensemhour's funeral! Overwhelmed by this outpouring of love his mother asked, "All these people know my son?" "Yes," replied the army representative, "we all know your son."

Today, we stand before God as Chayalim Bodedim. We stand as lone soldiers, so to speak. And, like Jordan (z'l) we do not stand alone. We are supported by one another. Our presence reminds us all that we are not alone. And we are strengthened and encouraged because we are here for each other, because we know each other. Because, like Jordan and the 6,000 people who attended his funeral, we are all connected. We are not alone. And I am here for that reason: I do not want to be alone. And, I don't want you to be alone.

And, lastly, I am here today to be present in the silence of our prayers. I love the words we recite, and the songs we sing but I am here to experience the silence that resides in the spaces between the words we intone, in the spaces between thoughts we think and the silence of songs already sung. Often, it is the silence between our words that expresses the most powerful message. In silence we speak most closely and most directly to God. In silence we can find the lessons of self-restrain, the lessons of humility and the reminders of that which is beyond words.

Returning to the scene at Mount Sinai, according to the *midrash*, this is what happened in the moment before the voice of God was heard:

*When God was ready to give the Torah to the People, no bird twittered, no fowl flew, no ox lowed. None of the Angels on high stirred their wings...the whole world was hushed into breathless silence. And the voice went forth: I am the Lord your God. When God spoke on Mount Sinai, the whole world became silent, so that all creatures might know that there is none beside him. (Ex. Rabba 29.9)*

When God spoke to our ancestors who had assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai, the world was silent. The noises of the animals became quiet. No one spoke. There were no words. And the voice of God was heard.

Some understand that this *midrash* teaches us about the power and exalted nature of God's voice, a voice that silenced the entire world. Instead, I like to think of this story a bit differently. It is not that God's voice that silenced the world, but that when the world becomes silent, when dogs don't bark, when the phones don't ring, when the incoming messages do not buzz, when the voices are still and our world becomes silent, we too can hear the Voice, just as our ancestors heard it at Sinai. And, for me, all of this is suggested by the verse from Psalm 92 with which I began.

1. The verse suggests that it is good to thank God. We are here, first and foremost, to acknowledge that there is a God, a God who listens and a God who cares. Tonight, I believe that God listens to us.
2. Second, tonight, we recall all of the blessing in our lives, the privileges we inherited from our parents, the health we enjoy, the freedoms we possess, the opportunities that have been there for us and for which we have no reason to expect. They are gifts. Today we acknowledge our blessings. And today we thank God for our lives: *It is good to thank God.*
3. And it is good to sing our praises to God, for our songs can express both head and heart, prayers of body and soul. .."to sing praises to God's exalted name." And when we sing praises together, we are lifted by those songs as well.
4. And between the words, before the songs begin and after the refrains have been sung, if we listen to the silence we may yet be able to hear God's voice. And, in the end, that is why I am here.

*Tov LiHodot Ladonai U'Lizamer LiShimcha 'Elyon.*