

## What Should We Remember?

**Kol Nidre 5780 / October 8, 2019**

**Rabbi Neil S Cooper**

A newly minted rabbi prepared feverishly for the High Holidays. He wanted to give the greatest sermon ever for the first time he would lead High Holiday services in his new congregation. He had toiled with the ideas and researched the texts upon which he would build his thesis. He struggled with the language to create a sermon that was balanced, thought provoking, not too controversial and extremely timely. The sermon, simply put, was a gem. Unfortunately, however, he spent so much time perfecting and agonizing over his first sermon, he did not have time to write any other sermons for the remainder of the High Holidays.

On the first day of Rosh HaShana he delivered his sermon. The congregation was bowled over. Never had they heard such a beautiful and passionate sermon. The next day, however, the rabbi didn't have a sermon prepared so he stood before the congregation and said:

How many of you remember yesterday's sermon? Nearly everyone raised their hand. The rabbi responded by saying, "Well, since you all remember my sermon from yesterday, we can simply take a moment to reflect on its message as we'll continue with our services".

In short, no sermon.

When the congregation gathered on Kol Nidre eve and the moment for the sermon arrived, the rabbi stood up and said:

How many of you remember my sermon from Rosh HaShana? This time, the congregants realized what had occurred before, so no one raised their hand. The rabbi, without missing a beat said, Fine. And he proceeds to deliver the sermon he delivered for the first day of Rosh HaShana.

Following Kol Nidre services, a plan was circulated throughout the congregation so that they would be ready for the rabbi's question when they reached the time for the sermon on Yom Kippur Day.

When the time came for the Rabbi to deliver his Yom Kippur sermon, delivered, he asked:

Who here remembers my sermon Rosh HaShana? This time, everyone on this side raises his/her hand and, on this side, not a single hand is raised. Good enough, said the rabbi. So that we're all on the same page, we'll take a moment so that this side can tell that side what I said!

High Holiday sermons are certainly the product of hard work, much thought and careful compositions. We all want to give our best sermons on the High Holidays. But the question on this new rabbi's mind, and on the minds of most of his and my colleagues, myself included, is which topic is most urgent?

In addition, a Rabbi must remember something else as he/she chooses a topic to address over the High Holidays: With all of the important issues to address, with all of the challenges which we face as Americans, do I have anything compelling and new to convey? There are great issues facing our country: Gun Laws, Sexual Abuse, Race Relations and Violence, Immigration, to name a few.

Perhaps it is best to consider matters which relate more directly the American Jewish Community: Dwindling numbers of affiliated Jews? The dramatic increase in anti-Semitism in this country and around the world. Or, perhaps we should address the growing rift between the American Jewish Community and Israel.

These topics are all important. Some are contentious. Some may be partisan. And so, to avoid offending or insulting or being repetitious, I would like to tell you how I feel about Brexit!

But seriously, as we observe the Holiest Day in the Jewish Calendar, I decided to begin the process this year by asking myself a simple and fundamental question which, I believe, rabbis need to ask:

What do I want our congregants and guests to walk away with at the end of these long days of prayer and introspection, as we move from the High Holidays into the New Year?

And I would like to spend a few moments explaining my answer to that question: At the end of the High Holidays, returning to our busy and complicated lives, I would like to give you three "take-aways", three very simple propositions for you to remember and hold on to during the coming year. The first is this: **There is a God.**

Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, one of the great leaders of Chasidism in the nineteenth century, once said,

"For the believer there are no questions. For the non-believer there are no answers".

This observation does not agree with my own. It is not unusual for me to sit with one of our congregants and discuss matters of faith. And, whether one believes or not, there are always many questions and few answers. For the non-believer, questions often begin with the following: I don't believe in that which I cannot see/feel/hear. And, for that matter, why should I believe? Why believe in God if there is no way to ascertain God's existence?

All good questions. If I cannot see, touch or feel God, I cannot believe that there is a God. But, if, as I believe, God is non-corporeal, I must ask: what then could one see, hear or feel? Without scientific proof, there is no God. Along these lines, one can maintain that there is no God unless and until someone can prove to me, with scientific certainty, that I am mistaken.

Admittedly, this line of reasoning answers certain questions. But, I believe, it raises many more questions. For instance:

Without the belief in a God, who is the author of all life, who endows all people with holiness and godliness, we must answer many other questions:

1. What makes human life more important than any other life?
2. Does life have meaning?
3. Is there any reason to act in any way which does not conform to our rational sense of being?
4. Is there anything other than humanism that dictates how we treat another person?
5. What difference does it make anyways if there is or is not a God?

The first part of my reply is the following: We have no proof of God, nor can we easily demonstrate God's existence, for several reasons: God is not a physical entity. True, we speak of God, **as if**, God can hear or see, even though God has no eyes or ears. But we use anthropomorphisms because we have no other way to describe God. Think of it as using language **which is limited** and **finite** to describe something **that is infinite**.

Any words we use to describe God, in fact, become somewhat heretical because through language we limit God. Yet we do it because **we** are limited by our ability to speak. And so, we use human terms, to say something about God, so long as we understand that what we say is limiting and inadequate.

But there is a more difficult question to answer today: I understand what you do not believe. You have told me what you don't believe in. But tonight, I pose a more difficult question to answer: In what, then, **do** you believe? A good question for each of us to ponder on Yom Kippur. I will give you a part of my answer. I begin with our Early Childhood Center and our young nursery-school aged children.

Some years ago, as I joined our children for their Friday morning, Kabbalat Shabbat services, I stood in our Sanctuary and asked the children what they thought was in this closet/the *aron ha-kodesh*. And hands shoot up to answer the question:

Several students, unable to restrain themselves until I called on them, shout out, "The Torahs!"

Is there anything else that someone thinks is in the *aron*? One child raises his hand and says: God is in the *aron ha-kodesh*. Interesting, I said, as we spent a few minutes trying to understand what this child thought about God.

Is there anyone else with a thought about the *aron ha-kodesh*? And one girl raises her hand and say: I think that inside the *aron*, behind the doors is a big mirror. I stood for a moment in silence, unable to speak.

After thinking for a while about that profound answer, I realized that, like that little girl, *Chassidut* and Mysticism, at times, use the metaphor of a “mirror” in which we can see God. Mystics speak of finding God everywhere and in everything in the world. Not physically inside of everything but reflected, as when one looks in a mirror, one can see whatever is in the mirror. What is reflected in a mirror is not “in” the mirror, but that reflection is somewhere, and we believe that by looking at a reflection we get an idea about that which is reflected. In that sense, I believe that God is reflected in everything in this world. I cannot prove it, just as you cannot disprove it. But that is what faith is about.

Faith and belief are choices, choices which we must consciously make. If we sit, waiting to see if faith overtakes us, we will wait for a very long time. Faith does not come to some and not to others. Faith comes to those who choose to believe, for those who are able and willing to view the world as a mirror.

The world has within it those who want to believe and choose to believe and those who don't want to believe. And for me, I read the words of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi from the perspective of one who believes. Rabbi Yehuda, redactor and editor of the Mishnah, said the following:

דע מה למעלה ממך: עין רואה ואוזן שומעת וכל מעשיך בספר נכתבין

Keep in mind what is above you: An Eye that sees, an Ear that hears and a Book in which your deeds are recorded. (Avot 2:1)

Rabbi Yehuda says, I cannot prove to you that there is a God, but I believe there is. But whether or not I am correct, my advice to you is the same:

Act **as if** what you do is seen.

Speak **as if** what you say is heard,

And consider the possibility that what you have done is remembered and judged.

Live your life **as if** there is a God.

Live **as if** all that you do and say is recorded and remembered. Live as if what you do matters. And, whether or not there is a God, if you follow this advice, you'll be a better person for it. **#1. There is a God.**

**#2. Our Lives Have Meaning:**

Believing in God may be a struggle for us, but that struggle does not bother or worry God. I believe that God can take rejection from time to time. I don't believe that God needs for everyone to believe in her. Rather, because of our connection to God, because our lives have meaning, God is interested in **what we do, not what we believe**. When we act, whether performing *mitzvot* or living our lives in the routines we follow, God does not want for us to focus on God. God wants us to focus on and care for each other. And when we care for others, we become God's partners, which brings me to my second "take-away" message:

**Our lives have meaning not because of what we believe but because of what we do.**

Menchem Mendel of Vitebskt goes a step further. He said: All my life I have struggled in vain to know what man is. Now I know that **man is the language of God**.

To the Chasidic Master, we find God in our proximity to others. At moments of pain and peril, when the road is too long to traverse, when the wall is too high to scale, when we have done all we can for ourselves, we cry out hoping to be heard, hoping for help. And in response to our cries, when a person responds, that response is the language of God.

In our congregation, in this community, our central mission, is to be there for each other, to extend our hands to each other. Consider for a moment what makes us the congregation we are. Consider all the ways we reach out to each other:

We "Cook for a Friend". We comfort those who mourn. We care for families sitting *shiva*. We visit the sick. We "Study Torah". We perform *mitzvot*. We welcome people to our community. We collect food, clothing and money for the underprivileged. When we reach out in kindness to another person, we are doing what God wants us to do. When we care for the earth, we are doing what God wants us to do. And, when we work together in this way, this brings meaning to our lives. Our lives have meaning when we connect with and reach out to others whether or not we believe in God.

When Menachem Mendel of Vitebskt says that "Man is the language of God", this is what he means: When we hear and respond, we act as God's partner, as the language which God uses to communicate with our world

The language of God is in the hand of another person. But there is something beyond "doing" which brings even more power and meaning to our lives. This is taught in the story we read on Rosh Hashana.

Remember how Abraham sent Hagar and her son, Ishmael into the wilderness. Remember how they quickly ran out of food and water and the boy, Ishmael, cried out.

וישמע אלוהים את קול הנער / And God heard the cry of the boy (Gen. 21:17).

Ishmael didn't cry out **to God**. Ishmael cried out, and God heard his cry. Ishmael cries and God hears the cries and speaks to Hagar and says: *hachaziki et yadech bo* / strengthen your hand in his. God says, what you do matters. The way I respond to the cries I hear is through your hands, your deeds. Hagar reaches out, lifts the boy and both are strengthened. **Take away #2: our lives have meaning because what we do matters.**

But Ishmael needs more than just a helping hand. He needs to know that he has not been abandoned in his time of need. Ishmael wants to know that, even in the hot, dry and desolate desert, he is not alone. And it is here that our partnering with God has the most power. Beyond what you do, your presence, by simply being there for a person who feels alone, **you** are the language I use, says God.

**And this brings us to take-away #3.**

**#3. The third message I convey tonight is just that: You are not alone.**

The single most quoted Psalm for the Book of Psalms in Psalm 23, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. In particular, it is considered to be the most comforting of the Psalms. What is so comforting? I'll tell you:

The Psalm begins when everything is going right. We lie down in green pastures beside still waters. Life is good. Until it is not. Something happens, we don't know what, but the author of the Psalm is no longer walking in green pastures. He is now in the valley of the shadow of death.

Everyone must walk through that valley at some point/s in their life. No one is exempt. And the author knows this. He doesn't ask, why is this happening to me? He doesn't say I don't deserve this. What does he say?

As I walk through the valley, in death's shadow, I won't be afraid, I know I can make it because **"Thou"/you are with me!**

When we are present for another in their time of need, we are not simply visiting. There is existential meaning to our presence. The deep sense of abandonment and alienation which one suffers at a time of despair, loss or pain often cannot be reversed. Even powerful medicines may not cure the disease or mitigate the pain. But we have the power to be the difference between existential loneliness and a profound sense of being supported by friends, by people who care, by a community.

As we spend this long day of introspection and prayer together, we reflect on our lives. We express our gratitude for our lives of comfort and privilege. We are grateful to live as we do, to possess what we possess. We are fortunate and, certainly, lucky to live when and where we do. But we must take none of it for granted and all of it as a gift.

(Meaning no offense to the conversations about and the implications of Brexit) this is the message that I leave, now, with you on this holiest night of the year.

Beyond the prayerful words we recite, beyond all upon which we meditate, take note, as well, of the gift of each other. It is that gift which is most precious: the gift of knowing that in a world which can be cold and dangerous, with obstacles difficult to overcome, we are not powerless. Our hands are strong. This year we take from this moment three reminders:

#1. There is a God.

#2. Our lives have meaning.

#3. We have our families and we have our community. We are not alone.

Kitiva V'chatima Tova / May you receive this year the gift of a year filled with joy, health and community!