

## **Standing Before God**

**Rosh Hashanah I 5779 / September 10, 2018**

**Rabbi Neil S. Cooper**

Generally, I do not ask for suggestions for High Holiday sermon topics. This year, however, on several occasions, I have been asked questions about prayer. As a result of that request, over the past year, I have spoken to the Officers and Board of Directors about prayer related matters. I have also received queries directly from you, our congregants.

You see, in the context of a community in which joy and sadness are, celebration and paralyzing pain are frequent visitors, we turn to God for strength, for courage and in gratitude. And all of these instances can motivate our questions,

- \*How do I pray, not how to say the words, but pray in order to connect with God?
- \*Where do I find spirituality?
- \*How can I pray if I don't know if I believe in God?

On Rosh HaShana, a day dedicated to prayers, these questions are certainly relevant. And, to be honest, these questions are personally relevant as well.

This morning, therefore, I share with you not just your questions but my question as well. I ask not about the prayers we recite, but about that which precedes prayer. I ask about a way to feel God's presence, about finding a way, if only for a moment, to stand before God. How can we stand before God? To answer that question, I propose four of the steps which one must take.

## I. To Stand Before God We Must Know Who We Are

Ron Lauder, President of the World Jewish Congress, wrote an opinion piece to the New York Times (Aug. 14, 2018) a few weeks ago. In it he bemoaned a controversial bill, recently passed by the Israeli Knesset, called the Nation-State Bill, declaring and defining the State of Israel as the Nation-State of the Jewish People. Although there is much in the bill which simply enshrines in law much of what Israel means to many of us, the bill has become hotly contested as inflammatory and even characterized as an undemocratic piece of legislation.

In his article, Mr. Lauder appeals to the Government of Israel to undo the Bill and defuse the controversies, not simply because it has become divisive in Israel, but because, he asserts, it will erode even further American Jewish support of Israel, which has been weakening for some time. Speaking of the Bill, Lauder writes:

**This is not who we are, and this is not who we wish to be.**

In response, I give equal time to Naftali Bennett, Minister of Education and Minister of Diaspora Affairs wrote emphatically that, yes, this **is exactly** who we are.

All agree that it is important to know “who we are”, even if we don’t agree on who that is. No matter which view you accept with respect to Israel, “who we are”, raises the first issue which is important for us to consider on this day of self-reflection and examination. Today we ask ourselves that question of identity, “**Who Are We**”?

When Lori guides a person who is preparing to immerse in the Mikveh, she guides and challenges the one immersing. She says:

As you stand in the Mikveh, alone, unadorned, without pretense or façade, you stand before God, just as you did the moment you were born, as the real, elemental you, as who you are.

Who we are, you see, is not determined by our clothes, by our appearance, our figure or hair, the things we generally obsess about. Who we are is not a question answered by genetic testing or even by who our parents are. Rather, who we are is a complex question which considers much more. We are who we are because of our relationships, formed by the totality of our experiences and tempered by the challenges we have faced.

Ask yourself the question: Who am I? Among the first answers you will provide might be: I am a wife or a husband, a brother or sister, a parent or a child, I am a friend. I am also a fighter, a survivor. At times I am a lover. At times, I am alone.

Recently, I saw a fascinating and deeply disturbing documentary called “Three Identical Strangers”. The movie recounts how three boys, identical triplets were adopted at birth by three different families. At age 19, in the most unlikely of circumstances, one of the boys realizes that there is someone who looks exactly like him. He finds what he believes to be his twin brother and, a short time later, the third brother comes forward.

At first, the improbable reunion, was a story too good to be true. Newspapers and talk shows invited the triplets for interviews and discussion. They became a national phenomenon.

But as the story goes on, the boys, and their adoptive parents, discover that they have all been part of study being conducted by a prominent psychiatrist. The brothers learn that they had been kept from knowing that they were triplets to facilitate a scientific experiment about twins or, in this case, triplets, separated at birth. They were denied their identities in order to facilitate a psychiatrist’s research. And, as that realization set in, the initial elation of their discovery gave way to feelings of anger, frustration and outrage.

In addition to defining who we are in terms of our relationships, who we are is also impacted by the path on which we have traveled. To know who we are

means to know where we came from and how we got here. If you don't know where you are from, you can't know who you are.

And so, when Ron Lauder says: "This is not who we are", he means, these statements which appear in the Bill in question, are not reflective, in his opinion, of our roots and the values upon which the State of Israel was founded. Whether you agree or not, when Lauder states, "This is not who we are" he means as well, knowing where we have come from, our history, our values, this is not the path we should take.

This is why the first thing we learn about Abraham in the Torah is where he is from. We first meet Abraham in the Torah, when he is in *Ur Kasdim*, a city believed to have been in Upper Mesopotamia, located in what today is Iraq. There God calls to Abraham and commands that he leave. God tells Abraham, "Lech L'cha"/ Leave everything. Start walking. I'll tell you when to stop. Who you are is not so much about where you are at this moment. It is about how you got here.

I believe that when we stand before God, we stand on the path we have followed from the beginning. We stand with the scars created by the pain we have endured, the addictions we have fought, the illnesses we have overcome, the challenges and obstacles we have faced. Only when we know where we have been, can we know who we are.

Rabbi Zusya taught: In the World to Come, they will not ask me: Why were you not Moses? Why were you not Akiva or Hillel? They will ask, "Why were you not Zusya?" God wants nothing more from us than to be who we are. Our job is to figure out who that is: Where is our true self? That is the first step to standing before God.

## **II. We Must Stand Before God as if We Are Being Judged on Our Actions**

To stand before God means to acknowledge that there is a God and a set of behaviors which God would like for us to adhere to. I am not referring to ritual injunctions and mitzvot. I am referring to the kinds of behaviors which occupy our prayers on Rosh Hashana. God wants us to speak kindly, to be careful not to hurt others. Show compassion. Help the sick and the elderly. Assist someone who needs help.

Ask yourself if you have treated the stranger, the widow, the orphan fairly and kindly? Have we cared for the stranger, the resident alien, the refugee? These are not political or partisan questions. These are matters of humanity. That is what is written **explicitly** in the Torah. (see Lev. 22:24) That is how God wants us to behave.

In this context, among the most important verses in the Torah is this seemingly mundane and often overlooked law: If you see your neighbor's ox or sheep gone astray, do not pretend **not** to see it. (Deut. 22:1) Did you get that?

The moral code to which God wants us to adhere is not one we follow only when someone is watching. It is not particularly laudable if a person only performs acts of kindness when others will see. If you see something that belongs to someone else AND THERE IS NO ONE AROUND TO SEE WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO DO WITH IT, don't ignore it.

You see that verse tells us that we need to act in a particular way even if no one sees us, even if God doesn't see us. If no one sees, there can be no penalty for an infraction. But **that's the point**. If you want to act in a way that God wants you to act, **you** must be your own witness. **You** know. **You** know that, even when someone else doesn't see you, **you** know whether you saw the ox, the indigent beggar or the stranger. God wants you to act **as if** you believe in a God who cares about how you behave, whether or not it is witnessed. Act in a way toward your fellow human being which you know **you** can be proud of, even if God doesn't see.

### III. Stand Before God with Humility

There is an interesting, if not disturbing prayer which exists in the canon of Jewish Prayers. This is a prayer which we recite when we see a person who is has physical anomalies. When we see a person afflicted with deformities or stricken by a disease, according to the great Medieval scholar and philosopher, Moses Maimonides:

one should recite the following prayer: Praised are you, Adonai, Ruler of the Universe, who makes people different. (MT *Hilchot Berachot* 10:12)

At first one might object to this suggestion, thinking that this prayer would be an affront to the one about whom the prayer is recited. But this prayer is not said **to the person we see**. This prayer is said **to God**. We need to be reminded that physical differences and anomalies are not punishments. Physical differences are not signs that someone has been forsaken by God.

This past summer, while traveling in Israel with our synagogue group, we planned an interesting dinner and theatre performance for our group at a restaurant in Jaffa called *Na Laga'at* / Please Touch. The food was quite good, but one does not come there for the food. One comes for the unique experience of eating in total darkness. By total, I mean that this was a darkness to which our eyes cannot adjust, that there was not even the smallest ray of light. And, in this way, we experience the world of the blind

The food servers, who guided us in the dark to our seats, brought us our food, in courses, were all blind. As they served our meals, they explained the history of the restaurant, they shared their experience of living with blindness and, of course, warned us about what food was on the plate in front us.

Each person had a different experience that evening. What is certain, however, is that, as we left the pitch-black dining room and re-emerged into the light, we all appreciated something we generally take for granted: our eyesight. We mention this each morning in the blessings we recite. We thank God for the gift of eyesight: *Pokeach Ivrim* / Thank you God for allowing our eyes to see. But, the

fact is that most of us can go for quite a while without acknowledging the gift of sight, until something changes. When the ability to see is taken from us, even for only an hour, we find meaning in and express gratitude for our ability to see.

From those who are blind, we also gained new insight, for when they “look” at another person, they appreciated that person’s inner essence. And from their perspective, we learn two things: First, we learn to perceive the inner holiness of each person. And second, we learn the lesson of humility.

Humility can begin with the simple realization that there are those who struggle mightily each and every day, to tie their shoes, to get dressed, to see the world, to do the things we do so effortlessly, without giving them a thought. But, after our dinner in the dark, we realized that we have done nothing to merit a healthy body. The food-servers we met did nothing to deserve their blindness. And from **that** simple and obvious lesson comes a sense of deep humility. Why them? Why not me?

When we see someone with physical differences, we recite a prayer which reminds **us** that this person, who might otherwise be shunned or about whom others might make jokes, this person is living proof of God’s imprint, proof of the infinite variety of people in this world. This prayer reminds us that it is our responsibility to welcome and embrace every person, especially those who remind us that God’s imprint is manifested differently in each and every person in the world. We are humbled and grateful for all of the blessings which come to us and for which we have no right to expect.

Opening wide the doors of our synagogue, greeting someone as they enter, enabling someone to cross our threshold, whether physically or spiritually, is a holy endeavor of the highest order. When they add their presence and their voices to our own, when they come up to the Torah or find a place of comfort in our sanctuary, we are uplifted, inspired, we are **humbled**. When stand with humility, we stand closer to God.

#### IV. We Can Stand Before God Only When We are Ready to Stand Before Ourselves.

It is not unusual for me to be confronted by a congregant who is having a crisis of faith or, more common, a chronic problem with the idea of God. Those conversations **begin** with questions or with statements about God: Is there a God? I am not sure that I believe in God. (And, from our six and seventh graders, an emphatic: “I definitely do not believe in God”. Do I still need to have a Bar Mitzvah?) These are conversations often, **end** with the words, “Let me think about that and I’ll get back to you”.

But these conversations also raise the question: How does one stand before God if one isn’t sure that one believes in God? A possible response comes from the portion of the Torah we read this morning, among the most powerful passages in the Torah.

Crying in the wilderness, Ishmael, the son of Hagar, is dying of thirst. Hagar, his mother, is unable to bear the sounds of her son’s pain-filled cries. She puts her son down beneath a tree and runs away, out of earshot of the crying child. Then, God hears the cries and says to Hagar, “Go to your child. I have heard him *ba’asher hu sham/* from the place from which he is crying” (Gen. 21:17). What is noteworthy in this passage is that Ishmael does not necessarily cry out to God. Yet, God hears his cries.

I don’t think that God needs us to believe in God in order for us to be heard by God. I think that God is more concerned about how we treat each other than about how strong our faith in God is. For those who do not believe, if the idea of standing before God in prayer seems intellectually dishonest, don’t stand before God. Instead, stand before your best self.

And, lest you think that standing before God in this way is a 21<sup>st</sup> century challenge, consider Maimonides’ formula for what it means to stand as your best and most authentic self:



One should not speak on a thing outwardly but think otherwise in one's heart. Rather, one's inner self should be like the self which one shows to the world. What is in your heart should be the same words on one's lips. (Hilchot De'ot 2:6)

\*Stand as who you are, your best self, not as who others think you are or as who you pretend to be. No mask. No deception. Just you.

\*Stand before yourself, your deeds before you, accountable for your actions. And be accountable, not simply for your actions that others know about. Be accountable, as well, for those only you know about.

\*Stand before God acknowledging the places you know you have failed and those places where you can say to yourself, I am proud I did that.

\*Stand before God bent and humbled for, no matter what you believe or don't believe, neither you nor I don't deserve the many gifts in our lives. We are no more deserving than anyone else on the face of the earth and yet, we have those blessings in our lives.

\*Stand in humility and gratitude for all with which we have been blessed.

Prayer is difficult, perhaps, because the pre-requisite of prayer is so difficult: to stand in God's presence. But, when you stand in silent prayer, before the words emerge, when you stand as who you are, when you stand before your deeds and when you stand in humility and gratitude, you can be sure that stand before God. And, whether or not you call upon God by name, you can be sure that God hears your cries.