Rabbi Daniel Berman
Rosh Hashanah Day One 2018
Kehillat Reyim 5779

Chaverim yekarim, my dear friends. L'shanah tovah.

It is, as always, wonderful to be here with you.

What a gift this year has been, strengthening our friendships, welcoming so many new families, and learning and praying together at the most important moments in our lives.

To those who are new, welcome. We're so glad you're here.

To those who have been here a year - or fifty - thank you for who you are, and for all you do for this loving community.

We are doing our best to fulfill our mission of a strong Jewish identity, traditional observance, spiritual openness and creativity, kindness, and generosity. We will never be perfect, but the qualities of compassion and forgiveness are alive and well in our community, and for that I am very grateful. It has been a joyful, meaningful year for my wife Sarah, for our kids Elie and Mica, and for me. Thank you for your trust, your openness, your partnership and your forgiveness.

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This has been a complex year. Political, social, policy and legal issues are a constant concern for so many of us, in the U.S., Israel and globally. No matter where we stand, our hearts and minds are being stretched, at times in painful ways.

I gave a lot of thought to addressing some of these questions through a Jewish lens during these High Holy Days, asking what Judaism has to say about universal health and human rights, about pursuing justice, about honesty, loyalty and integrity. And in fact there is a lot to share. Volumes of

talmud and halacha and teachings on spiritual ethics, with tensions, competing views and nuanced values.

But I don't think that's what we need right now. On our High Holy Days, we don't need to *know* more; we need to *feel* more, even *let go* more, expanding our sense of being, and reconnecting to what we hold sacred. These days are a matter of the soul.

During Rosh Hashanah, I will share *two* sermons, today and tomorrow, that respond to *an essential religious question*:

How can we begin to see ourselves as standing, always, in the Presence of God?

Over the course of many centuries, Jewish reflections on the nature of God - what we call theology - have grown and changed, in some ways radically, from our ancient tradition. This has been absolutely critical, allowing Jewish community to stay in relationship with God. As our lives have changed, our minds have changed, and our hearts have changed.

It is well over a thousand years ago when our Medieval philosophers and early mystics already began to challenge the classic Jewish theology of a personal God who hears prayer, takes note of a person's and community's lives and and responds. They brought in to the Jewish canon ideas of a far more abstract God, transcendent and indiscernible to even the most expansive human understanding and imagination.

Despite the transformation of ideas, the belief that we stand in God's Presence has endured as an essential and life-affirming part of the Jewish experience.

And it is one of the greatest challenges of modern Jewish life.

There are many reasons for this.

The first challenge is historical and sociological. Persecuted and living in impoverished ghettos in Eastern and Central Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, Jews found that secularism, a national identity and a rigorous Western education presented the best, if not the only, possible path to equality and integration. Traditional observance was largely left behind, as was much of its spiritual content.

A second challenge emerges from the first. We live in our minds and our minds require analysis, support, evidence, and proof to earn our intuitive trust. In sharing this challenge, I always think of Rabbi Art Green, the founder and now the rector of the Rabbinical School I attended at Hebrew College. In describing his personal decision to become a Rabbi, he tells a sweet story about his grandmother. She had become an atheist back in Poland, when her Hasidic parents moved from their small town to the big city. When she heard that her grandson Art was applying to rabbinical school, she wrote him a letter. These are its exact words: "Dear Arthur, I hear you still want to be a Rabbi. I would be prouder of you if you would be a teacher and teach people things that are true because if there was a God in the sky, he would be shot down by Sputnik already."
Intellectual pursuit is embedded in the Jewish ethos. That commitment, however, can crowd out an embrace of mystery, and its practices of prayer, reflection, silence, and meditation that are the foundation of a Jewish spiritual life. As you may know, Rabbi Green has dedicated his life to reclaiming and teaching Jewish spirituality with intellectual honesty and integrity.

A third difficulty is the most painful: the tremendous impact that the Holocaust had, and continues to have, on the Jewish soul. The Shoah was an irreparable fracture in Jewish theology, forcing the Jewish - and global - community to ask the most foundational questions about God:

Is it possible to have faith in God, who was so punishingly and devastatingly absent, leaving the worst impulses of humanity to dominate the earth? "Where was God?" became the dominant and unanswerable religious question for most Jews for more than half a century.
While there have been extraordinary people - Primo Levi, Elie Wiesel, Victor Frankel, Charlotte Delbo - who staked their lives on continuing to write, question and seek, for so many years, silence was overwhelming.

In recent years, however, we have seen the early stages of recovery from that trauma: a willingness to re-engage with spirituality. We have turned to practices of mindfulness, meditation, song, and new forms of blessings and prayer, which help us feel less fragmented, be silent and breathe deeply.

Many of you have shared with me that you have felt spiritual, particularly in moments when you have felt part of something so much bigger than you: when you have given or witnessed a birth, buried someone you love; when you have stood atop mountains or at the edge of the ocean.

Still, there can be a disconnect in modern Jewish community between our *experience* of these moments and our *embrace* of God. I met an old friend recently after not seeing her for many years. She told me about her family's recent hiking trip, and described an amazing experience at the top of a mountain during one challenging and beautiful hike. I asked her whether she felt God there. It was a hard question for her to answer (as it was for me to ask). She said no, she didn't think so. Later that evening, she spoke about the possibility that she encountered God and even felt God, but found it hard to name the Divine Presence that moved her "God." I thought this was a beautiful insight.

But I don't think this is just a challenge of language. The great religious insight of antiquity – that we are standing at all times in God's Presence – is not easy to fully grasp.

So how can we deepen our understanding of God?

I want to share two stories with you that have been sources of great strength for me, as I have searched for God's Presence.

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Cantor Kurt Messerschmidt was the Chazan of the shul where I grew up in Portland, Maine. He died at age 102, one year ago exactly this Rosh Hashanah. When he sang, it felt like the entirety of Jewish history flowed through him. Listening, you were no longer in Portland, Maine, but in Jerusalem, Iran, Spain, Morocco, Poland, Germany, Lithuania.

His voice was beautiful and operatic, resonating long after he stopped singing. I don't mean you kept singing his melodies or had them running in through your head; I mean your body continued to *feel* his voice. When he sang, I'm telling you, if there are angels, I am confident they sang along, or broke down crying.

Soon after getting engaged, Sarah and I asked Cantor Messerschmidt to sing under our *chupah*. As we stood by the ocean, he chanted the *sheva brachot*, the seven blessings traditionally recited at a wedding. The blessings speak about the couple getting married as an echo of the creation of the universe. Somehow when he sang, this was no longer a spiritual metaphor, but an actual event, holiness manifest in the world.

Cantor Messerschmidt was born during World War I near Berlin, Germany. His admission to Berlin University was later denied because he was Jewish. While he had an opportunity to leave

Nazi Germany prior to the closing of emigration to Jews, he decided to remain in Germany for one reason: to teach Jewish children. He taught at a Jewish school in Berlin where he met the woman he would marry, Sonja.

They were deported to Terezin concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. At Terezin, they were married in the spring of 1944. Separated by the Nazis shortly after, each was sent to a succession of concentration camps, including Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Cantor Messerschmidt escaped from a death march in the spring of 1945 by walking away in snow-covered terrain. Months later, in post-war Germany, he found a handwritten note Sonja had left weeks earlier on a bulletin board at a refugee center in Munich, a city neither had ever visited prior to the war. With the assistance of the American military, he went to her, and they reunited.

After emigrating to the U.S., he was hired as the Chazzan in Portland, where he was beloved. He formed a special relationship with my grandparents, speaking Yiddish together so their grandchildren didn't understand, and looking upon one another knowingly, without having to speak about a shared tortured history.

I knew him in a much simpler way: he was my grandparents' friend, my friends' grandfather, and my teacher. He left his position just before my Bar Mitzvah, *but he had already taught me the only thing I really had to understand to seek God's presence.*

He would come to our class when we were practicing the musical notations for Torah or learning Hebrew prayer or new melodies. We were typical kids, our interest waned as we got tired, and our voices cracked. In his thick accent, Cantor Messerschmidt would tell us, it's good, it's good, don't worry, at least you're all on the same key: it's called "off."

But when we started to sing or chant in a more focused way, he'd come and stand over us.
His voice was low and resonant and his chest was always expanded, as if about to burst with prayer.
And he'd whisper.
"Let it flow through you," he'd say. "Feel it. You'll get it when you feel it."
I imagine his commitment to *feeling* music helped him maintain some sense of being human in Nazi Germany. Even in the camps, he composed and he sang. The Cantor's insight comes from a life of trauma and recovery, which were in constant dynamic tension. His music was a testament that *God was present, flowing through him* when he needed God the most. He didn't always understand God's presence. Of that I am sure. But he *felt* the resonance of the Divine.

The *heart* of Judaism is Talmud Torah, broad and deep Jewish *learning*. We're a people of the book after all, dedicated to the *words* of Torah and prayer. *But the soul of Judaism is its feel.* Living with awareness of God's Presence around us and within us begins with our *ability to feel.* It is here where identity is formed and transmitted.

You don't need to believe that God *in fact* listens to actively responds to your prayers to feel comforted and even uplifted by chanting a *mishaberach*, a prayer for healing. Your mind may *say*, "God doesn't act in the world this way" but your heart can still *plead* for God's grace.
It's that moment of pleading where we encounter God's Presence.

The ancient psalms give us language for these moments of calling out: *mimaa'kim karati Adonai*, from the depths, the lowest places, I call out to God. *Adonai shima b'koli*, God listen to my voice.

The psalms are a blueprint. Ancient words become *tefila, prayer,* when we can feel those words, and then cry out with our own.

The second story is about a woman I got to know while training in chaplaincy at Mass General Hospital. I worked in the neurological intensive care unit, where patients were in early stages of recovery, many from devastating, sudden brain injuries, or waiting to enter surgery. In nearby waiting rooms, families faced heartbreaking decisions.

I didn't work with many Jewish patients; but one evening I sat with a Jewish couple, a woman and her husband, in the hours before she would undergo a very complicated brain surgery. We had spent a lot of time together during the prior week, talking or sitting quietly as they struggled to just endure their fears.

I asked if they'd like to say a prayer for healing or blessing or strength.

They told me they'd like to continue to talk, but they didn't have a relationship with God that made any sense to them.

So we sat together and talked, and her husband sang her a melody from her childhood, while she just tried to breathe.

We waited an hour, and another hour, through the night until morning. I fell asleep on the chair.

Before sunrise, a surgical team came to speak with her and prepare her for surgery. They placed her on a gurney to bring her to the surgical unit. As they wheeled her out of her room and down the hallway, I walked next to her. She looked up at me, pulled my hand towards her face, and began to chant.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad

Until the door closed behind her.

Rarely had I heard anyone chant the *shema* like this, addressing her words so directly and urgently to God.

Fearing that this was her last time she would see her husband, she reached outward, upward, inward, anywhere God was, in prayer.

This is not uncommon. We pray in crisis. Awareness of the Divine so often begins with a cry.

Months later, as she recovered memory and speech, she told me she didn't know where the words came from; *that they seemed to emerge from the depths of some well within, and flow forth.*

This woman's prayer, drawing upon mysterious depths, and the Cantor's insight and commitment to *feeling the Divine* are beautiful accounts of *what it means to live in God's Presence.*

The philosophers of early Medieval times were right, God is transcendent, indiscernible, well beyond our ability to grasp.

But God is also here with us, in this world.

We know because we experience God's Presence all the time; in moments of beauty, humility, fear, forgiveness, and, most poignantly, most courageously, love.

These are Sacred moments. We meet God there.

But our spiritual power is even greater than this.

There is only one Jewish response to the blessings of God: to share them with others.

Judaism makes that demand of us because it is in the act of sharing, of giving, that we most fully feel the Divine. This is how we stand in God's Presence: we become vessels to God's flow of blessing, receiving, shaping and then giving.

This theology of a person as a vessel for God's blessings echoes an ancient spiritual practice.

In the Sanctuary that the Israelites carried with them in the wilderness towards Eretz Yisrael and in the Temple in ancient Jerusalem, the High Priests would offer daily sacrifices, gifts to God on behalf of the people, and an intense encounter with God. After their offerings, the Priests would place their hands onto the people and recite the Priestly Blessing.

יְבָרֶכְךָ ה׳, וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ

יָאֵר ה׳ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וִיחֻנֶּךָּ

יִשָּׂא ה׳ פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם

May God bless you and keep you

May God shine God's light upon you and be gracious to you

May God's face shine upon you and may God grant you peace

Our rabbis emphasized that while the Priests carried out the blessing, it did not come from them. The blessing came from God, flowing through them onto the people.

What has changed since those ancient days is that *now we are all High Priests*, vessels of the Divine. When we touch others, God's blessing flows through us to them. We become participants in the unfolding of God's Being in the World.

Much of Jewish ritual has been built around this insight.

Parents lay their hands upon their children on Shabbat evening and bless them with the words of that same blessing, May God Bless you, May God protect you, May God grant you peace, wishing, hoping, praying that their children will be blessed with love and health and long life.

On Friday evenings in our home, we're often still settling into Shabbat when we bless our children, still coming out of the week, with all of its fragments, not quite where we need to be. And then we place our hands on Elie's and Mica's heads an it feels like there's nothing more at stake in our lives. We hope it makes some difference, that they'll feel more open-hearted, loving, connected, generous and forgiving for having been blessed, and that those blessings will continue to flow through them, touching others with these Sacred gifts. As the poet Lewis Hyde writes: "the gift must always move."

That feeling *that there is* something at stake for us right now, *that this is real,* is where Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur try to lead us.

It is extremely difficult to get there. But this is our task, and it begins with awareness.

Notice who you are sitting with. Hold them closely.

Who is not with you anymore? Remember their voices and what they taught you.

Listen closely to the rhythms of a moment of prayer.

Your experience of these days will be meaningful if you allow yourself to feel.

Close your eyes, breathe deeply, listen closely.

Our prayers and our melodies are about Love. Fear. Awe. Sadness. Joy.

These are Sacred qualities. Not only because we're uplifted or comforted or less alone when we feel them, but also because we get to give them to others.

Judaism is *lived* and *transmitted* through its *feel*.

But only if we live by the Cantor's teaching:

"Let it flow through you. Feel it. You'll get it when you feel it."

As we come into this new year,

Know that God dwells here, among us, within us.

May you expand your being, listening closely, feeling deeply, opening to the depths of the well within you.

As vessels, you have the ability to bring amazing potential to life.

Looking at the state of our world, you are needed more than ever needed right now.

L'shanah tovah.

May you be bless, and may you be blessed.