

## Being the God We Wish to See in the World

Shanah tovah.

As some of you may know, I love listening to podcasts. I love being able to learn, or to listen in on conversations, while I fold laundry, or walk home from work, or sit in traffic. But this practice of listening to podcasts can be something of a rabbit hole. I'll subscribe to one podcast, and they'll interview the host of another podcast, and it'll sound interesting, so then I'll subscribe to that podcast...and on and on. Suffice it to say, I have many, many, unplayed episodes on my phone.

One of my podcasts that I found through that chain is a Catholic podcast called Jesuitical. Even with my serious podcast backlog, I listen to Jesuitical almost every week. So what's a nice Jewish girl, a rabbi even, doing with a Catholic podcast?

Part of it is expanding my bubble, part of it is interest in the similar and different challenges faced by various religious groups (I also listen to a podcast called Good Muslim, Bad Muslim), but I think the thing that really has me tuning back in week after week is a short segment that they do at the end of every episode. Each of the hosts shares what they call "consolations and desolations," moments in the past week in which they felt God's presence or struggled to find God.

It's a vulnerable moment to share with their listeners. They've shared that it's hard to talk about those things so publicly, but they do it anyway.

And I think that this is one thing we can learn from them- because we're pretty bad at doing this. Sure, there are times when I feel the presence of God, and times when I struggle to. But I don't think I've ever sat down at the Shabbos dinner table and said, "you know where I found God this week?"

Other than a sort of general Jewish uneasiness with talking about God; after all, we're a people of doing much more than a people of believing- I think there's another reason why I've never done this, and I would imagine that I'm not alone.

We live in a thoroughly imperfect world, where finding God, if we even believe in God, can be really, really hard.

And that's something I've been thinking a lot about recently. I love Jewish practice, and I'm happy to talk about it ad nauseum to anyone who will listen. But it's hard to talk about God, and for me at least, a big part of that is that it can be so hard to feel God.

In a world that seems increasingly unstable, where literal and metaphorical fires rage, where bigotries of all varieties- racism, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, homophobia, ableism, you name it- are loud as ever, in a world full of illness, famine, flooding, and devastation- it is so, so easy to feel despair and isolation from the Divine.

But in a complicated way, I think that Rosh HaShanah is well-equipped to help us relocate God in the world.

Rosh HaShanah is also called Yom HaZikron, the day of remembrance. But remembrance of what? The end of this morning's haftarah summed it up nicely, as Jeremiah reports God's words:

"Truly, Ephraim (that is, us) is a dear son to Me, a child that is a joy! Whenever I have turned against him, My thoughts would dwell on him still. That is why My heart yearns for him; I will receive him back in love, declares the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

Our project over these days is to remind God who we are. That we are descendants of people whom God chose. That God loves us. That we are really trying to do our best, even though we so often fall short. We're reminding God that God is called a merciful God, and

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremiah 31:19

that God is supposed to deal with us lovingly, even on these days of judgement- perhaps especially on these days of judgement.

The rabbis imagine God giving us instructions on how to remind God to act mercifully. Which seems a little silly, like God is teaching us how to manipulate God. Except that we do this in human relationships all the time. When I'm awake, I remind Jeremy to leave me alone first thing in the morning, because I know I'll grunt at him if he tries to engage with me. Now it would be nice if I just could be more pleasant person when I first wake up in the morning. But that's not happening, at least not right now, and so I give my loved ones the tools to help me be my best self. I don't WANT to snap at Jeremy, but in my groggy, cranky state, it can be hard to remember that. So I empower him to help me treat him more kindly.

So too with God. If you've ever read more than a few chapters of the Bible, you'll know that the God of the Bible gets angry. But God is also called "רחום וחנון," "merciful and gracious." In one of my favorite images in the Torah, God says to the Israelites, "ואשא אתכם על כנפי נשרים, ואביא אתכם אלי," "I lifted you upon eagles' wings and I brought you to me."<sup>2</sup>

And so the project of the High Holiday season is to remind God that God \*really\* wants to deal with us lovingly and mercifully, instead of harshly and angrily.

And so the rabbis imagine God telling us about the musaf amidah, which we just recited silently:

"On Rosh Hashanah, recite before me verses about מלכות (sovereignty), זכרון (remembrance), and שופרות (shofar). Sovereignty so that you may allow me to rule over you; remembrance so that my memory of you will be triggered for good. How? With the shofar."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Exodus 19:4

<sup>3</sup> B. Talmud, Rosh HaShanah, 16a

By blowing the shofar (and, not to mention, through our prayers as well), we remind God of the world order that God intends; one in which God guides us with love.

All of this is well and good, and usually where the theology of the high holidays ends. But just a few weeks ago, we read from the book of Deuteronomy: “אחרי ה' א-לוהיכם תלכו,” “follow (literally, walk after) the Lord your God.”<sup>4</sup> The rabbis ask, “Can a person really follow God’s presence?”

And I’ll add, especially in a world where it can be hard to feel God’s presence, this is a really critical question!

But the rabbis, of course, answer their own question, saying:

Rather, follow God’s attributes.

אף, just as God clothes the naked, providing clothing to Adam and Eve, אף אתה מלביש ערומים, so you should clothe the naked.

אף, God visited the ill, appearing to Abraham shortly after his circumcision, אף אתה ביקר חולים, so you should visit the sick.

אף אתה, God comforted mourners, blessing Isaac after his father’s death, אף אתה ניחם אבלים, so you should comfort mourners.

אף אתה קבור, God buried the dead, after Moses dies at the end of the Torah, אף אתה קבר מתים, so you should bury the dead.<sup>5</sup>

Elsewhere in the Talmud the rabbis teach similarly, albeit more abstractly:

אף אתה חנון, just as God is merciful and gracious, אף אתה חנון, so you should be merciful and gracious.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Deuteronomy 13:5

<sup>5</sup> B. Talmud, Sotah 14a

<sup>6</sup> B. Talmud, Shabbat 133b

The rabbis make it clear that *Imitatio Dei*, following God's behavioral example, is a critical Jewish value, and a source for many of the other values and practices that we hold dear. This is basically the rabbinic equivalent of the aphorism "be the change you wish to see in the world;" the rabbis effectively are telling us: "be the God you wish to see in the world."

This really struck a chord with me as I kept thinking about the consolations and desolations from the Jesuitical podcast. Because the places where the hosts found or didn't find God weren't about lofty, Divine things. Maybe occasionally they were about a beautiful sunset, or a stunning natural setting. But the overwhelming majority were really about people.

They were about finding God in support they received from coworkers, in coming together to celebrate love at a friend's wedding, in gratitude for good roommates and good friends, in hearing that their parents and grandparents are proud of them, in spending snow days at home with friends, in seeing communities welcome refugees.

They were about feeling distant from God in light of hate speech and violence, in light of twitter fights, in light of moving away from family, in light of not finding a church community that really feels like home, in light of feeling frustrated by coworkers, in light of the political moment in which we find ourselves.

And in noticing this pattern, I've come to realize that we have a tremendous amount of power over how much God's presence is manifest in the world. By treating others mercifully, by helping others to celebrate and to mourn, by taking care of the vulnerable, we are acting as we hope that God will act towards us. In actively choosing to embody God's attributes that we recall today: love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, care- we make those attributes felt in the world.

And to someone else, that meal that we bring during shivah, or the fact that we showed up at a funeral, or the fact that we visited them in the hospital, or the fact that we asked “how are you” and meant it, or the fact that we forgave them for being imperfect- that may well have been their consolation, the place that they saw the presence of God that week.

I wish that God’s presence in the world were more immediately evident, at least to me. But in the meantime, it seems to me that the only way that we can make God more manifest in the world is by being God-like ourselves.

Now, we can’t let that go to our heads.

But we do have a tremendous amount of power to bring the Divine into our own lives and the lives of others. As we spend today begging God to remember us lovingly, to treat us kindly and mercifully; we also remind ourselves to treat others the way that we hope God will treat us. In that way, Yom HaZikaron is not just about God’s remembering us for good, but also about us remembering others for good. If we can remember to treat others the way that we remind God to treat us, we can increase the amount of Godliness in the world. That is, obviously, an enormous task, but it is a critical one. Especially because, as I mentioned earlier, we tend to be a people more of doing than of believing. So we can talk about God until we’re blue in the face (ok, let’s be serious, we probably won’t), but what our tradition really demands of us is not that we talk about, understand, or even believe in God; only that we follow God’s blueprint, the Torah, and use it to make ourselves holier people by making the world a holier place.

And if we do enough of that, perhaps one day, we might live in a world where instead of despair and powerlessness in the face of suffering, we feel hope because of the love and kindness of others who are doing God’s work. A world in which it’s totally normal to sit around the Shabbat table and talk about where we found God this week. As we continue with the repetition of the musaf amidah, I encourage all of us to take some time to think about the ways in which we can be the God we wish to see in the world. Because there are

a lot of us here right now. And if we can each bring just a bit more of the Divine into the world, we may indeed find ourselves blessed with a good year. Shanah tovah.