

Rabbi Yael Romer

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5780/2019

Over the summer, I spoke with a member of the congregation whose partner was facing a life and death surgery. Faced with the fragility of her partner's hold on life, she described to me her profound faith in God. She said, "I pray to God every day; I always have."

Many of us have experienced these moments. Times of tenderness and vulnerability accompany fear, grief or loss. And stages of overflowing gratitude follow blessings, weddings, births, or healing. These moments are life changing and sacred.

And yet, we have all encountered periods of very real uncertainty in our belief, questions about the role, if any, that the Divine plays in our lives.

*Yud Hey Vav Hey* is God's ancient, unspeakable name. Not only do we affirm that the Source has no mortal form or physical manifestation, God's name itself, יהוה, is unpronounceable. But we humans limit the experience of the limitless. We compartmentalize our understanding of the Divine. We regularly assign masculine nomenclature to God in our speech, texts, and prayers; we say He, Master, Lord, or even *Aveenu Malkeinu*, Our Father Our King. Our traditional *Rosh Hashanah* melody and metaphor is powerful and moving. But its words are simultaneously limiting and narrow. This evening I want to discuss a sense of the Divine that has no limits. What could be more fitting than addressing the nature of the Sacred on the Jewish New Year?

We say that God is One: *Shema Yisrael יהוה Eloheinu יהוה Ehad*. But this One, unpronounceable God is known by no fewer than 70 names in the bible and 72 names according to Kabbalistic Texts. The expansive naming of the One God is an express invitation for us to experience the vastness of the Eternal.

To have a relationship with יהוה is to be called into a relationship with the earth. We refer to God as *El Olam* (Eternal Source of the Universe), *El Elyon* (Source on High), *El Adon* (Supreme Source), *El Chai* (Source of Life), and *Borei et Ha-kol* (Creator of All). Rabbi Nachman writes, "*Ribono Shel Olam*, grant me the ability to be alone, let me go outdoors each day among the trees and grasses and all growing things... to express there all of the things that are in my heart." It is no wonder that so many of us find a sense of awe in the beauty of nature that

opens for us a portal to the Sacred. During these Days of Awe, we will be in nature for *Tashlich*, second day *Rosh Hashanah*, and *Sukkot*. Our Jewish relationship with God requires that we be in balance with the earth and step up to the challenges of our impact on the planet. *Al Chet shechatanu l'fanecha*: for the Sin which we have committed before You, *El Chai, Borei et Ha-kol*. For the 300 million tons of plastic that we use and the 8 million tons of plastic that we dump into our oceans every year. For the ways that we choke the air and deplete land and water resources. We have myopic focus on our own immediate comfort and power without the ability to deliberate on our grave impact on this world that was entrusted to us. Ann Frank wrote, "I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness: I hear approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better." What could be more fitting than addressing our relationship with the Source on this New Year? To know a boundless God is to choose renewable energy and to advocate passionately for policies that will protect the earth for future generations. Being in a relationship with God includes the sacred imperative that we assume our role as good stewards.

To have an experience with the Sacred is to be called to go beyond oneself. God is *Ein Sof* (the Infinite), *Makor Ha-chaim* (the Source), *Tzur* (the Rock), *Ha-Merachim* (the Compassionate One), *Adonai Tzidkeinu* (Justice), *Shalom* (Peace), and *Makom* (Place). Where there is compassion, justice, and peace, there is the Divine. Let's talk about God. When we contemplate our country's southern border, are we treating asylum seekers and immigrants with compassion and justice? *Al Chet shechatanu l'fanecha*: for the Sin which we have committed before You, *Makor Ha-chaim*. For imprisoning children in cages and separating them from their parents. For dehumanizing the Other. *Al Chet shechatanu l'fanecha*: for the Sin which we have committed before You, *Tzur Yisrael*. For not insisting upon the same human rights for Palestinian children that we insist upon for our own children. Do we expect Israel to honor the spark of the Divine in every human being?

To have an experience with the Sacred is to be called to forge a place for oneself. Each of us have the God given right to see ourselves created in the image of the Divine. *B'tzelem Elohim bara otam*: "In the image of the Divine, the Source created them." This classic Genesis passage describes the creation of humankind. God created men, women, and non-binary people in the image of *Elohim*. Among

the 70 names of God, including *Shadai* (the personal presence of God), *Ha-shechinah* (the female manifestation of the Divine), and *Elohim* (the non-binary nature of the Source) exists the affirmation that the Divine Presence exists in all gender identification and beyond gender. God's preferred pronouns, the image of the Divine include: he/him/his; she/her/hers and; they/them/theirs, and that is just the beginning. *El Shadai* literally means "God of my breast", forging a relationship with the Divine is personal.

What keeps us from knowing God? What keeps us from walking with the Sacred in our lives? God is not male or female. God is not an academic venture. God is the experience of the All in the universe. *Emet* (Truth) is one of God's 72 names. *Emet* is spelled א מ ת with the first, middle and last letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Truth is inclusive, the All of life. Encompassed in the four letters of יהוה is the root ה י ה ; ה י ה is what was, הוה is what is, and יהיה is what will be. When we constrict our sense of the Ein Sof, we shrink the presence of the Source in our lives.

Ruth Brin wrote, "When men were children, they thought of God as father; when men were slaves, the thought of God as master; when men were subjects, they thought of God as king But I am a woman, not a slave, not a subject, not a child who longs for God as father or mother. I might imagine God as teacher or friend, but those images, like king, master, father or mother, are too small for me now. God is the force of motion and light in the universe; God is the strength of life on our planet; God is the power moving us to do good; God is the source of love springing up in us. God is far beyond what we can comprehend."

This coming year, 5780, I will speak, teach and pray as your Rabbi, making a concerted effort to invoke and draw upon the many names of the Divine: *Elohim*, *Ha-shechinah*, *Shadai*, *Makom*, *Makor*, *Tzur*, *Shalom*, *El Chai*, *Borei et Ha-kol*. Perhaps as we begin to advocate for the Divine around us and the Divine in the other, we will also begin to honor the Divine in ourselves.