

Rosh Hashanah Sermon 5772 Sept. 30, 2011

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Does it seem to you like we are living in especially difficult times? Are you troubled about what is going on in the world, in America and in your own life? Many have expressed concern for the future with all drastic changes we have witnessed this year; others have expressed a sense of hopelessness in the face of so much suffering bombarding us from all directions. Globally, this past year we have witnessed a series of political upheavals, especially in the Middle East with the Arab Spring and of course the recent Palestinian bid for membership as a sovereign state to the UN. And if that isn't enough to worry about; natural disasters seem ongoing, we recall the tsunami in Japan but there have been many others. What is going on, we wonder? But then we find ourselves needing to repress all our global concerns in order to turn our focus to our more immediate problems here at home and in our own lives. The economic situation is dire. Will there be a recovery? When and to what extent? We see so much uncertainty, so much instability and suffering. Who can we turn to, who will help us? Do you remember the hope, faith and expectation many had during the last election, there was almost a prophetic sense about President Obama. It is no wonder people's

expectations have not been met. We have lost faith in the value of our homes, real estate, banks, Wall Street and the entire world's faith in the almighty dollar has been shaken as well. And on a personal level, we have lost jobs, we have lost savings even life savings, we have lost our ability to retire and perhaps we have even lost faith in the whole system.

Feeling the weight of these hard times one congregant approached me and said Rabbi, I am really depressed about all of the terrible pain and suffering going on these days; I feel hopeless, please say something hopeful; optimistic this Rosh Hashanah in your sermon; please say something to make us all feel better. (pause)

Well, I want to be able to comfort people by saying what everyone always says in Israel despite living in constant turmoil and day to day uncertainty, they say “yihehah tov”—it will be good.... But I don't know that. (pause) I want to comfort you with the words of psalm 27, psalm associated with the HH. Adonai is my light and my help, from whom shall I fear?

ה' אורי וישעי ממי אירא-----ה' מעוזד חיי, ממי אפחד

Adonai is my source of strength, who could make me anxious?

I wish I could be sure that I could comfort you by assuring you that there is nothing to be afraid of because God is with all of us this journey called life, no matter what happens, but I am not sure that is very comforting either... and I will tell you why. Did you know that most American Jews don't believe in God? 60% do not believe in God and only 25% believe in a God that we can have a relationship with or that we can talk to. So, this is where we find ourselves this RH; everything feels difficult and people are suffering and we have lost faith in so many things; and one of them is God; and that is a problem.

But I have hope; and my hope that the statistics do not tell the whole story. But how could that be? Well, what do people mean when they say that they don't believe in God? I think that what most Jews mean when they say they do not believe in God; is that they don't believe in the God they grew up with. They don't believe in the God they were taught about in Hebrew School or sitting in the pews of the Synagogue.

Who is the God we grew up with? I am not going to tell you, I want you to tell me: by a show of hands—and don't look at your neighbor's answer, tell me:

How many of you were taught that God of Israel is omnipotent meaning all-powerful? Was it a God that rewards and punishes? How about omniscient, was that God all-knowing? What about perfect and unchanging? And of course who was taught that our God is --omnibenevolent---that God is pure good? Let's call that God "Super-God"; because "Super God" is all-powerful and controls everything in the world!

Now, raise your hand if you were taught that the Jewish God is a God who loves you and needs you? Could the God of Israel make a mistake? Can our God grow and change and even understand us better with time? Can the God of Israel be changed by or persuaded by us? Is this a God who lives in an intimate relationship with us and makes us partners in creation? Let us call this "Relationship-God."

I had a sense that the God most of us were brought up with was Super God, [and it seems I was correct]. Super-God is the all powerful, all knowing unchanging/perfect God. But when things go bad in the world or in our lives, Super-God becomes a problem for us.

Why does Super—God, the all powerful, all knowing, all good-God cause an insurmountable challenge to our faith? Well as Harold Kushner points out that, “A God of [infinite] Power extorts obedience, but cannot command love. A God who could spare the life of a dying child, who could prevent the earthquake but chooses not to, may inspire our fear and our calculated obedience, but does not deserve our love.” Super-God can not comfort us in our darkest times because Super-God is the one to blame. Maybe it is time to give up Super—God and put our faith in “Relationship God”. Maybe “relationship God” isn’t all powerful and perfect but loves us and desires to work with us and help us navigate this very complicated world.

So you might be thinking--But wait, Rabbi, back up a minute. You can’t you just trade in our All-Powerful God of our 4000 year history for some new hybrid model? It doesn’t work like that, right??!!? Yes, I agree ---If Super-God, the all powerful and all knowing, unchanging and perfect God is the irrefutably authentic God of the Bible, (from the time of Abraham) than we can not just make up a new one! But wait, is our concept of God as all powerful, all-knowing, unchangeable and perfect the God of the Torah/the Bible? Well, let me cut to the chase--No!, These ideas about Super-God, all powerful, all-knowing, pure good God that we learned as kids--originate in

Greek philosophy and only made their way into our religious beliefs in the Middle Ages; only 800 years ago or so; and remember Abraham lived almost 4000 years ago, Abraham didn't believe in Super-God. Why should we have to accept the lightning bolt holding God of Greek philosophy if it doesn't work for us anymore?

This question came up when I was having lunch with my Rabbi (and Head of the Ziegler Rabbinical School), Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson at this little Vegan place in LA this past summer. I said, "What do we do about our problem with God?" People don't believe in the concept of God the All-Powerful Punisher? He replied, "Do you?" I shook my head, no. He went on to say, "Yonatan, the greatest obstacle for our movement is to articulate a theology, that is, a statement about our belief in God that is consistent with what we believe and what our people believe. Rabbi Artson, then introduced me to his work on Process Theology, it is called Process because this system of belief holds that God is always in process with us, with the world. God is not operating separately and coercively, but rather continually evolving in relationship with us. His book will be out soon. This sounded very much like the "relationship God" I already believed in.

Quoting Rabbi Artson's recent article, "Based on the presumption [that God is omnipotent], God must have all the power (that is what omnipotent means) For God to be omnipotent implies that no power exists that is not God's which means...that any occurrence is God's responsibility...God gets credit for anything good in life; for anything bad in life, God gets the blame." The intolerable consequence of the omnipotent God (Super-God) is that God is responsible for our suffering. ...and how do we feel? We feel abandoned, betrayed...by such a coercive power. Process thinking opens our eyesto a God who is relational and loving. The Prophet of Old Chagai understood this when he said, 'I am with you declares the Holy One'.

The key to understanding Rabbi Artson's view is that all is not pre-determined and controlled by God, but rather that our relationship with God is always evolving and in a continual state of what Rabbi Artson describes as "becoming"...we change and God changes---but how can we understand this idea? God is in a sense like a divine GPS (Global Positioning System)...God's love persuades us to live righteously, honestly, justly and lovingly—"See that person asking for money, give them a little tzedaka!" Says the Divine GPS. But you decide not to, you say, "oh the stop light is about to turn green, no time now". God doesn't punish you but simply says--

“recalculating”. Now the next time you pass someone in need, God (the Divine GPS) will say, “give that person some tzedaka” and this time you do. In this way, God is not coercive but persuasive and offers us insights that will lead us to live a holier life, to be a better person. Whatever choice we make, God is right there with us, to guide us towards our higher selves.

Well, maybe your thinking, this God sounds good but how do we reconcile this new “Relationship God” with the God of the Torah? Well, maybe if we set aside our list of the assumptions that we have been taught since we were children, namely that God is all-knowing, perfect and unchanging we will see that Super- God is not really in the Torah at all! I believe we will find that the Torah is filled with “Relationship God”!

Let us look at examples of Relationship God-- the dynamic, changing, learning, feeling God of the Bible. What about Noah? God tells Noah after the flood: “Never again will I doom the earth because of man since the inclinations of his mind are evil from his youth; nor again will I destroy all life.” God learns about his creatures, his creations. God regrets a prior decision to destroy the world; God rethinks how to act in relation to humans

in the future as God gets to know and understand them better. God enters into a relationship, a covenant of Peace with Noah.

What about Abraham? Was his God omnipotent and distant from God? We remember his conversations and arguments with God; remember the story of Sodom and Gomora. God said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do ... for I have singled him out, that he may teach his children”. Then Abraham convinced God not to destroy the cities of Sodom and Amora if there will be only 10 good people there and God agreed. Yes, God loved Abraham and was his partner; not equals, but Abraham was God’s partner, God calls him, “Avraham ahuvi”, my beloved Abraham. We too are loved by God and are God’s partners.

The primary example of Relationship God, the God that relates to us, that works **in/with and through us** in the Torah is in the case of Moses. In Exodus chapter 3 God says to Moses at the burning bush, “I have certainly seen the suffering of my people and heard their cries on account of their taskmasters.” But why, then, did God wait hundreds of years to redeem our People from Egypt? Could it be that God needed a partner for this mission? Is it possible that God needed Moses in order to redeem the people? We

certainly know that Moses could not have freed the Jewish People without God, but why does God not save the People until Moses would go as his emissary? Because, I believe, that God could not free the People without Moses; Moses was God's conduit to be able to come into the world and deliver our People. Because according to this understanding of "relationship God," ---the way that God works is not acting upon us but rather--- **with us, in us and through us.** We are the vehicle brings God's healing and power into the world, but here's the catch and where people get stuck; we can't be that vehicle without the fuel, that fuel, **that energy is God!**

When we find Moses at the burning bush, we find a man who had run away; a man hiding from his mission in the world. God says to Moses, "Come, I will send **you, you** shall free my People, the Israelites from Egypt."

(Exodus) But the Torah isn't just speaking to Moses but it is speaking to us.

Today too, we need to find out how God needs us to help, deliver and save the world from all of the very difficult challenges that we are facing. God needs YOU!

We can't do it alone and God does not do it for us. We do it together, in a loving relationship where God is the source of all energy and creation. We

are the wire and God is the electricity---when we open our eyes, hearts and souls to this possibility, we can become a live wire for God in the world. We can bring infinite holiness, healing and repair when we live with God in the loving relationship of covenant.

How does it work? We become God's partner when we do mitzvot. Every time we do a mitzvah, we connect to God and bring holiness into the world. When we do a mitzvah we become that live wire that allows God to work **with / in and through us**. When you say the blessing over bread, for example, you say, blessed is God who brings forth bread from the ground, but bread doesn't grow from the ground? Why is this? Because we bless God not only for the ingredients for bread but for making us partners in making that bread; for being God's partners in maintaining creation. How can you become the wire that conducts the electricity of the Holy One and be God's partner? When you save a starving child, you bring God's holiness into the world. When you light Shabbat candles, remember and keep Shabbat-- you make time for God and holiness; you bring God into the world. When you visit the sick and the suffering through our Yad Sima Tova committee, you bring God into the world. When you are conscious of what you eat by keeping kosher or grateful for what you eat by making a blessing,

you bring God into the world. When you work to preserve and protect the environment by carrying around a coffee mug or water bottle, or working with Adath's Etz Chayim environmental committee, you bring God into the world. When you do disaster relief work, like with our local Nechama organization, you bring God into the world. When you visit and support Israel, you bring God into the world. When you come to Adath to pray at daily minyan and insure that there is a minyan for Mourners, you bring God into the world. When you reach into your pocket to give tzedaka, even when it is hard, you bring God into the world. When care for the deceased by helping our Chevrah Kavod Hamet—our burial society, guarding a body or doing tahara/purification you have definitely experience bringing God into the world. Mitzvot done with the intention of being God's partner in bringing kindness, holiness and goodness into the world are not a burden but an expression of love and relationship. When we work together, we bring God in to the world.

I want to conclude by telling you a story: I remember feeling-- hopeless and that sense of deepest despair and emptiness that we all know. It was Sept. 11, 2001. I woke up to the image of the Twin towers, one on fire (smoking), there was no sound on the TV, just a picture, after a couple of minutes the

sound popped on, “a plane has just hit the 2nd tower”; I had just seen it with my own eyes. Was I dreaming? I had to pinch myself. Not long afterwards, I witnessed a plane flew straight into the Pentagon, the symbol of the security of our nation, stood there helpless to attack. My illusions of living under the protection of the mightiest country in the world were shattered. My faith in humanity greatly weakened. My faith in God was on shaky ground at best. I went for a walk in my neighborhood of New York that afternoon and sat down on a park bench, I was depressed, hopeless; empty; I couldn't even cry. I was beyond despair. I had never felt that way before. I actually had no idea what was coming next but I knew that I would never see the world the same again. I told a friend a few days later on Rosh Hashanah in Long Island, I think I have lost hope for the future now that terrorism has reached our borders and destroyed our greatest symbols of strength and prosperity in America. Whatever time is left, whatever will be, I want to be at home in Israel, with my People and search for God, because I don't know where God is? Only days later, on Yom Kippur I stood at the Kotel, the Western Wall in Jerusalem... and suddenly I started to cry. In all of the chaos where everything seemed so uncertain and so unstable, I stood close to our holiest of places and felt something again, a connection, God, a tradition; a covenant and a relationship that gave me strength and gave me hope. I

pressed my face against those cold stones and cried even harder. It wasn't the all-powerful God, that I experienced that day but the all-loving God of covenantal relationship, "relationship God" was luring me back to faith; luring me back to the path of hope, love and faith. I suddenly felt a sense of mission for my life despite the suffering and the chaos. That mission was to teach and help people to love each other, to love God, something I had never expected to be the direction of my life.

My prayer for all of us on this Rosh Hashanah and in these very difficult times is that can all find comfort and hope in God each one us will hear God luring us back to a sense of mission, of tikun olam bmalchut shadai, repairing a broken world under the sovereignty of Shadai (the name Abraham called the God of loving-kindness), so that God can God can work with us, in us and through us. Kaveh el Adoni, chazak vyametz lebecha v'kaveh el Adoni—Hope is with Adonai, open your heart, strengthen your and have Hope in Adonai---Amen

Shanah Tovah