NOW, GOD, WHERE WERE WE?
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West End Synagogue, Kol Nidrei 5772

Maybe you've heard the story about God, Shmuli, and the New York State lottery:

Every day Shmuli, a pious Jew, prayed to God: "Master of the Universe, I am a poor man and a humble man -- but I believe with complete faith in Your absolute power! Would it be too much to ask that I be allowed to win the New York State lottery?"

Day after day the old man prayed: "Master of the Universe, Ruler of Heaven and Earth, please -- let me win the lottery. And, if it is not too much to ask -- could I please win on a day when the prize is especially big?"

Months went by with no response from God. Shmuli nevertheless maintained his prayers. The lottery prize grew steadily.

Finally, it was the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year. As the final words of *kol nidrei* echoed, Shmuli cried out again: "Dear God, I have been praying for months now with all my heart and soul. Please, please: let me win the lottery!"

With that, a blinding light filled the little shul. The walls shook, the earth trembled, and a *bat kol*, a voice from heaven called out: "Shmuli!"

"Yes, God?" answered Shmuli timidly.

"Please, Shmuli, meet me halfway -- go buy a ticket!"

We laugh at the idea of a heavenly voice. We laugh at Shmuli's absurd expectation of the miraculous. But the story raises critical and relevant questions for us. If we cannot believe in a heavenly voice, if we don't believe in a God who determines the lottery; if we don't believe that prayer changes the course of events -- then what <u>can</u> we believe today about prayer and about God?

I don't know how many of us would confess to be like Shmuli -- conversing with God on a regular basis. Many of us consider ourselves atheists or at least agnostics. Most of us reject anthropomorphic, patriarchal God language. Most of us can't reconcile religious belief with the horrendous tragedies in this world. Most of us consider ourselves sophisticated humanists who understand religious texts and rituals as flawed, mortal constructs. Some of us hesitate to profess belief in God because we fear being lumped with fundamentalists with religious and social views antithetical to our own. Some of us are embarrassed to identify as believers because others might think we're just plain weird.

Counter to popular belief, Reconstructionism is not the atheist denomination of Judaism. Mordecai Kaplan professed a deep belief in God -- albeit God as an impersonal, transnatural Power or Force in the world and in human beings. True, Kaplan repudiated Shmuli's God, the supernatural personal God who intervenes in human affairs. And yet every Reconstructionist prayer book has retained the imagery of an anthropomorphic God. We still address God in the second person: "*Baruch atah, or b'ruchah at*, Blessed are You, God."

Even Kaplan the humanist wrote that "[t]he human mind can rest only temporarily in a humanistic philosophy; after a while it resumes its endeavor to extend its horizons beyond the narrow span of earthly life and the limited area of visible and tangible realities" (Judaism as a Civilization, p. 130). Even Kaplan the rationalist understood that we yearn to touch the mystery of life, and that to survive, Judaism must respond to our human longing to connect with the mystery of life.

For us here at West End, the challenge is for each of us to reconstruct an understanding of God that is intellectually honest, yet as compelling as "classical" God-belief had been for our ancestors. Each of us must construct our own understanding of what God means in our lives. Especially tonight and tomorrow, on Yom Kippur, you and I must consider the state of our own personal and collective relationship with God.

Yes, we've outgrown our childhood conception of God as the Superman in the Sky. That's old news. Yet most of us, consciously or not, develop our own sense of God. As in most areas, in religion we rely more on our own experience than on what we are told to believe. I think often of an anecdote told by Rabbi Larry Kushner about a Shabbat afternoon discussion he once had with a group of kids in his shul:

> I wanted to talk with them about holy matters and so **I asked them if they believed in God**. I thought that some would and some wouldn't and that we would have a lively discussion. But to my astonishment, no one raised a hand. They were not spiteful or disinterested or even impious. As a matter of fact, they were serious, interested, and honest. And by their silence they were simply saying that they did not believe in God. In much the same way that they might have said matter of factly that it wasn't raining.
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> My surprise soon became sadness. This must surely be the end of the line. The final despiritualization of American Jews. I only recall a great disappointment, a kind of finality and defeat. So it's come to this. Three thousand years of fire and piety for a bunch of spoiled rotten little suburban kids who unemotionally say they don't believe in God.
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> And then later on, I thought of a different question. Or maybe it was the same question. **I asked them if they had ever been close to God**. And every one of them raised their hands. Freely and naturally. Unaware of any contradiction or inconsistency. But now I had to have proof, so I asked then when and where. And one by one they described what I believe to be the Jewish experience of God. One told of the previous evening when we had lit Shabbos candles. Another of a few months ago amidst anger and sadness upon the death of a grandparent. And still another of a few days earlier when, even though they didn't feel like it, they helped their parents.

Like Rabbi Kushner, I believe such experiences are precious clues to a reality we ignore at great cost. Even as adults, we might experience something whispering words of comfort in moments of failure or solitude. We may feel a presence in moments when we serve someone else or when we're excited by a new insight. We may experience a presence in moments of joy or intimacy with family and friends. And we may experience a presence sharing our pain and anger in moments of tragedy and loss. In all these experiences, the highs and the lows of our lives, we may feel as though -- we may know, in our heart and our bones -- that somehow, we are not alone.

These perceptions are subjective; they can't be verified objectively or scientifically. They may be projections or imaginations. They may "only" reflect the workings of our psyches. Or these

experiences may bear witness to a common inner truth. They may hint at a unifying sacred reality we share – I don't mind calling it God, use your own terminology -- which is, at the same time, within us and yet beyond us, immanent yet transcendent, accessible yet mysterious.

Of all our human faculties, our religious imagination may be the most precious. It cries out to be cultivated, not censored. We must learn to pay closer attention to our encounters with the sacred. These experiences can lead us to a God who is always available if only we would just stop and listen.

Reason reminds us that God is not a person. That's nothing new for Jews; 2,000 years ago the Jewish philosopher Philo rejected the idea of an anthropomorphic God. Maimonides did the same in the Middle Ages. Reason determines what we cannot in good faith believe; but experience and imagination teach us what we cannot deny. Being human means exercising <u>all</u> of our faculties, our reason, our senses, and our imagination.

Jews have always understood that the idea of God points us towards *something we can imagine but never can see*. "*Lo tuchal lirot et panai, ki lo yirani ha-adam va-chai* -- You cannot see my face," God tells Moses, "because humans cannot see me and live." "*Raita et achorai, u-fanai lo yeirau* -- you may see My back, but My face cannot be seen" (Exodus 33:20, 23). Judaism understands God as <u>*el mistaeir*</u>, the Hidden One, as *ein sof*, the Infinite. Language is incompatible with the Divine because it is finite. And yet even language has the capacity of the infinite, of transcending itself. Language can point beyond the word towards the source of the word. Myth, metaphor, and poetry all gesture towards the sacred.

On a literal level, it is obvious God is not a person; human beings can't speak to God, God can't speak to us. But on a deeper level, we know that human beings have always felt compelled to describe a relationship with God in which dialogue is possible. **One need not believe in a personal, supernatural God to speak to God**. One need only use one's imagination, only be open to the mythic possibility of language in order to say, "*baruch atah*, Blessed are You."

We intellectuals use words to describe, to define, to contain, to control. Often, we're guilty of the same literalism as the fundamentalists we disdain, a rigidity which constrains our vision and suffocates our soul. We must learn all over again what came so naturally to us as children: how to understand words as lyrics; how to sing.

Inevitably, reality shatters so many beliefs we once considered true and essential. We learn that our parents are neither perfect nor omnipotent. We learn there's no tooth fairy. We learn that our heroes are deeply flawed human beings. We learn there's no God who listens to us and answers our prayers and protects us from all harm. There's no God who stops the bad guys and rewards the good ones.

As adolescents and young adults, we begin to examine critically the belief systems in which we are raised, and find them lacking. Many of us abandon that which we naively had assumed to be true, and look elsewhere for meaning or adopt cynicism as our faith. Some of us gravitate to secularism or atheism, and discard religion as a refuge for the simple-minded and superstitious.

Atheism may actually be an essential step in the evolution of human faith. The Talmud describes how one of the greatest of the rabbis, Elisha ben Abuyah, lost his faith when he watched

a young boy tragically fall to his death while fulfilling the Torah's commandment to shoo away the mother bird before taking a nestling -- a *mitzvah* that is supposed to be rewarded with long life, not death. Watching this horrific tragedy, Elisha ben Abuya declared that "it is all a lie. There is no reward. There is no Judge. There is no Judgment. There is no God."

Elisha ben Abuya abandoned Torah study and became an apostate. He turned to secular wisdom and mocked his former colleagues who maintained tradition and belief. The rabbis excommunicated Elisha ben Abuyah and vilified him as heresy heretic. Forever after in Jewish life, the name of Elisha ben Abuya was not to be heard. Forever after, he was to be known only as *acher* -- the nameless, the Other.

Is there anyone among us tonight who doesn't identify with Elisha ben Abuya? Who among us has not lost the faith we may have had as children, and become estranged from this tradition with which we have at best a complicated, often love/hate relationship? Who among us has not, at some point, become *acher*, the Other?

Yet we need not remain stuck forever in estrangement. As we move deeper into the stages of our lives, we may become open to a different perspective. We may realize we can maintain our critical stance, and yet understand religious belief in a different and more sophisticated light.

Professor Neil Gillman teaches that as adults we can intentionally and consciously step back into the stories we've abandoned, and restore their power for us. The theologian Paul Ricoeur describes this phenomenon as "second naivete." We may understand that the narrative is not true in a scientific, literal sense -- but we also understand that through the lens of symbolism and myth, the narrative expresses a truth which resonates with our own experience -- a truth we choose no longer to deny.

For instance, I'm curious to know if there's scientific evidence for the Exodus, if it "really happened." But actually, even if archeologists could prove that the events never occurred, it doesn't in the slightest diminish the Torah's narrative for me. I know from my own life, and from the experience of so many others, that the process of redemption described in the Book of Exodus is 100% true.

I know in my heart that that redemption begins only when the oppressed begin to realize their predicament and cry out in pain. I know it's true that when tyrants are threatened with losing control of those whom they oppress, their hearts become hardened. I know it's true that personal and social change only happens when we are willing to step into the fears that sustain our status quo, when we walk into the Red Sea. I know redemption happens only when we venture into a future that is unknown and unfamiliar – when we walk towards a Promised Land. And I know that something deeper than us inspires and sustains us through the wilderness on the way. I know that voice can be heard only when come to a place of vulnerability, when we lower our defenses and listen. That's the story of the Exodus. It's all true.

When the Torah speaks of the voice of God, may seem absurd to understand that literally. But it's not at all absurd to hear a real voice you and I actually know pretty well by now – the voice we experience as the deepest, most trustworthy voice amidst the cacophony in our head. We each know that sometimes, if we lower the volume of the voices trying to drown it out, the voices of anxiety and shame; if we can let ourselves go to a cleft in the rock, to a place of

vulnerability and surrender – then we might hear a still, small voice, the voice of God. And then each of us might open our mouths to respond, *hineini* – here I am. I hear You.

Tonight, tradition says, you and I stand together outside a set of gates. Gates can be obstacles -- or they can be openings. Gates can represent the barriers locking us in place, or our ability to surmount our limitations. Gates can symbolize the limits of mortal language, or the opening of the human imagination. Gates can represent the boundaries of the mind, or the limitless outlook of the mind's eye.

Tonight, each of us has the possibility to free ourselves from the prison of literalism. Each of us can walk through the gates by exercising the neglected but precious gift of our imagination. Each of us can walk through the gates by imagining the loving embrace for which we yearn. Each of us can walk through the gates by reopening in our mind's ear the conversation with God we interrupted years ago.

We have a choice: to stay here, on this side of the gates, in the place that is known and comfortable. Or we can see the gates as an invitation to step through to a different way of being. The Jewish choice, as always, is to step forward. Tonight the gates are open; tomorrow, as the sun sets, they begin to close. Our business is urgent, our time very short. The time to decide is *hayom* – today. The time to decide is now.

"Said the Holy One: if you have come to a house of worship, do not remain standing at the outer gate, but enter gate after gate, until you have reached the innermost gate."

We can never penetrate that final gate; we can never unlock the mystery. But tonight, and every night, we can struggle to reach beyond ourselves and open ourselves to wonder.

"Thus says the Holy One: Blessed is one who listens to Me, watching daily at My gates, for one who finds Me finds life."

Tonight, may we free ourselves enough to step forward together through those gates. May we have the courage to open a passage to our deepest, truest selves. May we walk through the gates to God, and pick up that conversation we thought had ended so many years ago.