

On God, Spiritual Discontent, and Self-Knowledge: A Theology of Divine Friendship
Rosh Hashanah 5783 / September 26, 2022
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“Do you have to believe in God to be a good Jew?”

You may or may not be surprised to know that we clergy get this question a lot.

Since I started here at Temple Beth-El in July, I’ve spent a lot of time having one-on-one conversations with you, the members of this congregation, over lunch or coffee or meetings in my office.

(If you and I haven’t had the chance to get together yet, please do reach out to me and let’s set something up. I’d love to get to know you.)

Each of your stories is unique, of course, but one theme that seems to keep coming up is uncertainty over what to believe about God, or discomfort with the idea that there is a God at all.

I share this because if you feel that way, I want you to know that you’re not alone.

God is such an abstract concept and one that defies scientific proof—which, in our culture, is generally the way we determine whether something is *real* or not.

Plus, the reality that terrible things happen so often to good people makes it hard for many of us to believe in a God who is supposedly good and just.

So, I want to acknowledge today that many of us here aren’t so sure about this whole God thing, and that’s OK.

And I want to say from this bimah that you do not have to believe in God to be a good Jew.

And now, having said that, I want to tell you that, personally, I *do* believe in God.

I feel that I have a close relationship with God, and that relationship is not only central to who I am as a rabbi and as a human being, but it has also carried me through some challenging times in my life.

Like many of you, I would imagine, I struggle with anxiety and fear and self-doubt. It’s uncomfortable, to say the least. Sometimes it’s paralyzing and downright scary.

But I find comfort, serenity, strength, and the confidence I need by turning to God.

Because God, to me, is *not* some abstract idea, and certainly not some word to be thrown around willy-nilly.

Not only is God *real* to me; God is my *friend*.

And through this friendship, I have come to know myself better. And I have become a better person.

Because I know so many of us struggle with the idea of God, I’d like to tell you about how I think about God and experience God in my life.

Whether you consider yourself a believer or a skeptic or an agnostic, I hope my words might help you think about this challenging and elusive concept in a meaningful way.

And, maybe, it will help deepen *your* own experience of the High Holy Days this year.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great Jewish philosophers of our time, said that Judaism teaches us to be content with what we *have*, but never with what we *are*.

Simple but profound. Be content with what you have, but never with what you are.

This is what it means to live a spiritual life:

- Never to be static. Never to think you've reached the top.
- To know that, wherever you are on the ladder, there are always more rungs to climb.
- To feel the pull upward, and to keep climbing—even when it's hard.

To live spiritually is to *believe* that you can become a better person.

It's to *want* to become a better person—because you know deep in your soul that, no matter how long you've lived, you are always and forever a work in progress.

It's to *know*, without a doubt, that there is a *better* version of yourself yearning to come into being—and that it is fully in your power to *become* that person.

This is a core tenet of Judaism, and it is the promise of the High Holy Days.

You *can* become a better version of yourself. But you have to *want* it, and you have to *work* for it.

This is the work of *t'shuvah*, and it will *not* come easily.

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar of the 12th century, taught that the first step in *t'shuvah* is to confess our misdeeds and shortcomings.¹

But how do we know what to confess?

It's one thing to say, "Saw-ree!"—like my kids do after they hit each other or sneak their technology behind our backs.

They know it's something they're supposed to say "sorry" for, so they do it just to fulfill the requirement. But they don't exactly *feel* sorry.

That's clearly *not* what Maimonides means when he says we need to confess.

But it *is* what we might find ourselves doing if we skip ahead too quickly and forget about the critical first step *before* the first step in *t'shuvah*.

And that step, as I learned recently from my friend Cantor Adam, is artfully built into Maimonides' statement, beneath the surface.

Maimonides' word for "confess" is "*l'hitvadot*." This word is closely related to the Hebrew word "*l'hitvade'a*"—which has two meanings:

One: It means "to know yourself." And two: It means "to make yourself known."

Before we can sincerely confess our misdeeds and shortcomings; before we can *begin* to do *t'shuvah*; before we can become that better version of ourself that we want to be, we have to do these two things:

We have to really get to know ourself, and we have to make ourself known—not to other people, but to God.

Why? Because the only way we can really know our deepest self is through an intimate relationship with God.

You may say: "Nah. I know myself pretty well. I don't need God or anyone else for that."

But, to borrow a phrase from the journalist Haynes Johnson, most of us are probably sleepwalking through the history of our own life when we say that.

We know ourself *selectively*:

- We remember easily the good things we've done, but not so much the bad.
- We know our positive character traits, but maybe we don't see the negative ones as clearly.
- We're quick to justify our own behavior and rationalize away our shortcomings.

We all *do* this.

But this self-satisfied and partial view of who we are is our biggest barrier to spiritual growth. As long as we see ourself this way, we will not be able to climb the ladder, and we will never become better.

To truly know ourself, we have to crack ourself open and be radically vulnerable and honest about our personality flaws, our bad actions, our failures, our unkind thoughts, our secret transgressions.

And that's *not* something we can do with another person, no matter how close we are with them.

We can share a lot with our spouse, our friend, our parent, our therapist. But not everything.

There are *some* things that we simply cannot share with another human being.

Some of these things live in our consciousness and we're keenly aware of them.

Others are buried deep in the recesses of our being and it's too humiliating or painful to admit them even to ourself.

So, they have to remain the exclusive province of our private inner life.

Meaning that: no matter how many friends we have, no matter how close and trusting our relationships are—when it comes down to the hardest, most anguishing aspects of our being, we are alone.

As Heschel wrote: "Human eyes can see the foam, but not the seething at the bottom.

"It is such a sense of solitude which prompts the heart to seek the companionship of God. [God] alone perceives the motives of our actions. [God] alone can be trusted."²

• God is the best friend we can possibly imagine, because God can listen with endless patience and without an iota of judgment.

• God is always nearby when we need strength or comfort; all we need to do is call.³ And God feels our pain when we are brokenhearted.⁴

• God keeps our confidence perfectly, and forgives eagerly, and loves us more than any human has the capacity to love.

In the embracing presence of God, there is no shame and no embarrassment, and no need to hide anything.

Because God, and God alone, knows everything there is to know about us.

As the psalm says:

“O God, You have examined me and know me. ...
You discern my thoughts from afar. ... You know all my ways.
There is not a word on my tongue but that You, O God, know it well. ...

It was You who created my conscience.
You fashioned me in my mother’s womb.”⁵

We may suppress or forget or be oblivious to certain things we have done or certain parts of our personality but, kind of like Amazon or Google, God remembers every deed, every thought, every search we’ve done on the sly.

God knows us better than we know ourself.

Maybe that feels creepy or intrusive.

Or we *could* see it as an incredible gift...

Because it means that we’re liberated of all self-consciousness...

Liberated to open ourself up and be completely raw and honest and pour out everything to God and hold nothing back.

And as we willfully make ourself known to God this way, we will come to know ourself better, because pouring ourself out this way will generate insights into who we are that we’ve never *had* before.

And these insights, in turn, will help us understand what we need to confess, and what we need to change, and what we need to do to become that better version of ourself we aspire to be.

This is what prayer is all about: letting go of all pretense and unburdening ourself to God—our intimate friend, in whom we can trust completely.

This is what we’re here today to do.

So, I want to invite you to focus on trying to experience prayer that way.

Throughout these Holy Days, we’ll call the pages in the prayer book, of course—but don’t worry so much about what page we’re on, or whether you know what the words mean.

I want to encourage you to focus instead on going deep within and getting to know yourself.

Imagine yourself standing in the warm, penetrating light of God—opening yourself to the core and laying it all on the table.

Vulnerable. Raw. Honest.

What do you think you might see when you meet yourself this way?

From experience, I can tell you it's uncomfortable. But the awareness is enlivening.

Like me...

- Maybe you'll see a spirit that becomes angry a little too easily, and you'll realize that anger is a manifestation of arrogance and self-righteousness.

How can you cultivate humility and a calmer disposition in the coming year?

- Maybe you'll see a personality that strives too much to control the things and the people around you, and you'll understand that this need is rooted in fear, anxiety, and self-doubt.

How can you build your self-esteem and relaxation practices and learn to let go a little more in the coming year?

- Maybe you'll see a self that is a bit too entitled or expects perfection and holds others to standards that are impossible to meet.

What can you do to become a little more gracious and understanding and empathetic this year?

There's not a single one of us who hasn't strayed from the path and caused harm to the people around us.

To truly know oneself is to become aware of our flaws and misdeeds—not only intellectually, but also spiritually and emotionally.

- And not only to acknowledge them, but to *feel* them in our bones.

- To *feel* the hurt we have caused others to feel.

- To be discontented with who we are because we truly grasp the impact of our behavior on others' lives and on our own, and we *genuinely* desire to change.

Only when we achieve this degree of self-awareness is real *t'shuvah* possible.

Rosh Hashanah is the day God created humankind. And our prayer book says God renews the work of Creation every single day.

We, too, can recreate ourselves anew—today and every day.

But to do that, we have to get to know our true self—the good as well as the bad—and we have to come face-to-face with wrongs we've done and the things we'd rather not admit even to our own mind.

And the best way—the only way—to do that is by turning to the one friend to whom we can make ourself fully known down to the core.

And so, we pray:

“[God], Search me inside and out with your beam [of penetrating light]
Pour your awareness throughout my heart like honey
And find the crookedness and selfishness there
And lead me away from it...”⁶

Teach me to be content with what I have, but never with what I am—and let my spiritual discontentment propel me up the ladder, toward You.

Help me become that better version of myself that is *yearning* to come into being.

¹ Maimonides, *Laws of Repentance* 1:1

² Heschel, *Man's Quest for God*, 17

³ Psalm 145:18

⁴ Psalm 34:19

⁵ Psalm 139:1-4, 7, 13

⁶ “From Psalm 139,” in: *Mishkan HaLev*, 125