

O GOD, WHERE SHALL I FIND THEE
Rosh Hashanah Morning 2015

Shanah Tovah!

As you know, one of the things I do each month – along with probably every other rabbi in the country – is to write the cover article for our bulletin. Usually, the comments I hear are along the lines of “Nice column, rabbi,” although when I wrote about the pending nuclear deal with Iran I did hear some other comments as well.

But the piece I did this month about religious doubt, if judged by the number of comments and notes I’ve received, really seems to have hit a nerve. Figuring out the role of God in our lives is quite a challenge, at least as much as in Abraham’s day when God instructed him to sacrifice his son Isaac.

In looking for God or hiding from God (as Jonah did) – or maybe it’s the other way around (as in our Abraham story when God has to call out twice “Abraham, Abraham,” as if wondering where the man might be – I’m sometimes reminded of the children’s game “hide and seek.” We hide and we seek, and sometimes can’t even play the game because we stop looking.

The author Robert Fulghum – who wrote that classic *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, has a wonderful description of what happens when we hide, but no one is looking. Here’s the way he tells it:

“Did you have a kid in your neighborhood [he writes] who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while, we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn’t keep looking for him.

“As I write this [he continues], the neighborhood game goes on, and there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him. I considered going out and telling them where he is hiding; finally, I just yelled, ‘Get found, kid!’ out the window. And scared him so bad he started crying and ran home to tell his mother. It’s real hard to know how to be helpful sometimes.”

He continues: “A man I know found out last year he had terminal cancer. He was a doctor. And knew about dying, and he didn’t want to make his family and

friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. Everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody... But, privately, his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, didn't trust their strength. And it hurt that he didn't say good-bye. He hid too well," concludes Robert Fulghum. Getting found would have kept him in the game. This was hide-and-seek, grown-up style. Wanting to hide. Needing to be sought. Confused about being found. "I don't want anybody to know." "What will people think?"

Hiding is something that we do well. Too well, at times. We hide from each other, we hide from our families, our friends. And we hide from our people. We hide from God. Hiding seems so endemic in human nature that in Judaism we designate a special day when, with intense effort, we return from our hiding places, return from where we have hidden from each other, from our tradition, and from God. That day, of course, just over a week from now, is Yom Kippur.

Think of the story we tell on Yom Kippur, the story of Jonah that I just mentioned. Jonah, you remember, is told by God to warn the people of Nineveh, the great city, that they were standing on the verge of destruction because of their wickedness. So Jonah, afraid to do what God has asked, flees. He travels in the opposite direction from where God wants him to go, as he sets sail for Tarshish. He goes farther and farther away from his mission, until his ship runs into the Perfect Storm, and Jonah is singled out as the culprit. Finally, his return from hiding begins. *Ivri Anochi*, he announces to his shipmates, "I am a Hebrew; I worship the Lord, the god of Heaven who made both sea and dry land."

Only after Jonah reasserts his identity as a Jew can he muster the confidence to fulfill his mission, to lecture the Ninevites concerning their sinfulness. In coming to terms with his identity, in returning to God, he renews his concern for the suffering of his fellow, Jew and gentile alike.

Now, at the beginning of this new year of '76, I ask us to come out of our hiding places, to seek to overcome our alienation, on both a human and spiritual level. For even here, in a sanctuary of loved ones and friends, there is alienation. Even here, in this sanctuary, there are some who sit here in loneliness, because of pain and fear that have not been shared, because of hurt that has not been resolved, because of failures that have not been overcome, because of unhappiness that is hidden. And nothing can be worse than feeling lonely in a crowd of people, yet I am sure that such loneliness has been experienced at one point or another by all who are here.

Judaism teaches that it is never too late to come out of hiding. Judaism teaches that the gates of repentance are always open, it is never too late.

The story is told of Elisha ben Abuyah, known as “Acher,” the “outsider,” one of the most tragic figures in rabbinic tradition. Acher was a rabbinic sage who abandoned Judaism, who turned against his people and his God. His student was Rabbi Meir, who would become one of the most important rabbis of the Mishnaic period. Rabbi Meir made numerous attempts to bring his teacher back into the fold, but so great was Alisha’s alienation from Judaism, that Rabbi Meir’s efforts were continually in vain. The Talmud relates how, when Elisha was deathly ill, Rabbi Meir came to visit him. Again, he asked his teacher to repent, whereupon Elisha retorted: “Tell me, Meir, will God receive me? Will my petition be accepted? Rabbi Meir answers: “Yes, God will receive you!” At that moment, we’re told, “*bacha Elisha v’nistalek.*” Elisha cried and died. Rabbi Meir believed his teacher’s tears to have been proof that at the very last second of his life, Elisha, as a Jew, had come out of hiding. A pity, of course, that he had waited so long.

The longer a Jew waits to come out of spiritual hiding, the harder it becomes. We become so entrenched in our ways that it can take a real jolt to break out of our alienation, and this includes alienation not just from God, but sometimes from our own families.

Robin Norwood, in her book *Women Who Love Too Much*, tells the story of a man, divorced and remarried, who was sitting at home one Sunday afternoon watching the football game. He was alone because his wife and stepdaughter had learned that he was happier with them out of the house so he could watch the game in peace. Midway through the third quarter, the ‘phone rang. He got up to answer it, annoyed that he had to interrupt the game because there was no one else in the house to get the ‘phone. It turned out to be his brother, calling to tell him their father had just died, and that he would have to come home for the funeral. He had never been terribly close to his father, but at a time like that, he had no choice but to go home. A few days later, during the *shivah*, his brother said to him: “Isn’t it strange to be back in the old house again and nothing has changed, except that Dad isn’t sitting over there watching television.” And the man realized where he had learned to form the habit of shutting people out of his life, unable to sustain any kind of warm human relationship with anyone, and he, the son, had already ruined one marriage and was damaging a second by doing the same thing. He went home determined to get help and do something about his fear of intimacy.

So often we live our lives in hiding, refusing to share our time with others, even family, merely going through the motions without making ourselves part of the lives and struggles of those who should matter most to us. The tragedy, of course, is all the more great, when disinterest and alienation is passed from one generation to another.

We find a story in the midrash that illustrates this: In a dream, Rabbi Akiva once saw a man, his face blackened with soot, running while carrying a very heavy load of wood on his shoulder. Rabbi Akiva asks the man, “Why are you working so hard?” The man answers: “Please don’t detain me.... You see, I am from the dead. Every day I am forced to chop, gather and carry this heavy burden of wood.”

“What did you do in life to merit so heavy a punishment?” Rabbi Akiva asks him. “I was a tax-collector. I used to favor the rich and oppress the poor.” But tell me,” Rabbi Akiva persists, “Have you discovered, in that world, any way which I can help you, anything I can do to alleviate your pain, your burden?”

The man answers: “All I can say is what I have heard: If I had a son who could stand up in the congregation and say “*Bar’chu et Adonai ham’vorach*,” I understand that my suffering would ease. But I died before my son was born, and there was no one to teach him.”

Akiva awakens, and after much searching he finds the son, who has no knowledge of Judaism at all. Akiva teaches him until the son finally is able to say the *Bar’chu*, then recites the Kaddish for his father – the first recorded instance of the Mourner’s Kaddish. Finally, Akiva dreams of the man again, who is resting peacefully.

This is a story of alienations overcome; the alienation between parent and child, between the child and God. Martin Buber famously taught us that God is found in our relationships. By joining the congregation and community, the boy comes in from hiding, establishes a link to his father that he never knew, and in doing so, becomes part of the community of Israel.

We all have our spiritual hiding places. Let us not hide ourselves so well that no one can find us – that we ourselves become lost. It is time to find ourselves, and open ourselves to those we love.

Kein y’hi ratzon.