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“There is a God in the World”

Over a hundred years ago in the town of Berditchev, there lived the saintly Rabbi Levi Yitzchak. One day he ordered the town crier, the *shames* of the community, to come to him.

“What is your wish?” he asked the rabbi.

“Go to every storeowner and shopkeeper in the market place,” Levi Yitzchak commanded. “Tell them to close their businesses and to assemble in the town square, for I have an announcement to make.”

“But, Master,” exclaimed the town crier, “today is market day and this its busiest hour. Could you not postpone your announcement?”

“No,” replied the *tzaddik*. “Go and tell them that Levi Yitzchak, the son of Sarah of Berditchev, has an important proclamation. It cannot wait a day or even an hour. They must halt their trading, close their shops, and come to the town square at once.”

The *shames* reluctantly left to do the *tzaddik*'s bidding. He stopped at every store and every shop and told the people that the holy *tzaddik*, Levi Yitzchak, had ordered them to come to the town square for an announcement of great significance. Grumbling at the ill-timed disruption, but with curiosity piqued, the Jews obeyed the command, shut their stores and gathered in the town square.

Once all had assembled, the *tzaddik* stepped up onto a box, signaled for silence, and began to speak: “I have asked you to come here on this busy day at this busy hour because I have news of great consequence for all of you, news which cannot be delayed even another moment. And it is this: I, Levi Yitzchak, the son of Sarah of Berditchev, declare to you: ‘There is a God in the world!’”¹

There is a God in the world! Given the fractured world we inhabit and the frenetic lives we lead, we often need reminding. But there is a God in the world, revealed in our yearning to do what is right and good; in our gratitude for all that is beautiful in our lives beyond our ability to control or create; and in our courage to persevere through life's inescapable sorrows.

God's Seal is Truth

Despite claims to the contrary, truth is truth. The Talmud teaches God's seal is “Truth.”² God exists in moral discernment and ethical striving.

Dennis Praeger posits:

If there is no God, then the most significant aspect of life – morality, the notion of right and wrong – is merely a personal decision....As [last] century's most eloquent atheist philosopher, Bertrand Russell, wrote, “I cannot see how to refute the arguments for the subjectivity of ethical values, but I find myself

¹ Rabbi Jacob P. Rudin, *Very Truly Yours*, pp.142-43.

² *Emet*, Yoma 69b.

incapable of believing that all that is wrong with wanton cruelty is that I don't like it.”

Indeed, even those who aren't sure they believe in God – even those certain they don't – still must render account before some moral standard.³

Yet you examine the headlines of dishonesty and deceit, and note the cynical indifference with which so many Americans shrug them off, and you can't help wondering whether, ethically speaking, many Americans have just checked out, failing to recognize how what John McCain characterized as “the growing inability, and even unwillingness, to separate truth from lies”⁴ weakens our social fabric. When a society stretches its ethics, those ethics soon lose their elasticity. Expand them again and they offer less resistance until finally none at all. Eventually even dishonesty and wanton cruelty become acceptable.

Yom Kippur reminds us they are not. Neither is there room for ethical laxity or moral relativism in a conscientious Jewish life. Certainly, we are imperfect, often neglecting our better selves. And on Yom Kippur God stands ready to forgive our failings if we repent them. But Yom Kippur also proclaims to us a code of right and wrong rooted in the belief in one God. This philosophy we call Ethical Monotheism represents Judaism's great theological innovation and contribution. Hermann Cohen, the pioneering German Jewish thinker, deduced that only one God standing outside all of creation, could command a set of universal ethics by which all of creation was bound.

A rabbinic legend from the life of Abraham illustrates. Hidden as a child in a cave by his father, Abraham emerges to gaze for the first time at the sun. Marveling at its brilliance he determines, “This is the god I shall obey.” When the sun sets and the moon rises, he assumes the moon the more powerful god, declaring, “I shall heed the moon.” Then clouds cover the moon. “Wait, I shall serve the clouds.” Next a strong breeze scatters the clouds, and he realizes the wind is mightier still. But as the moon sets and the sun returns, he concludes, “One God has created them all, and that is the God whose truth shall guide me.”

Rabbi Leo Baeck designated such awareness religious “consciousness” – an intuition of a power greater than ourselves in the universe, a God who summons us to do what is right and good.

Lifting our Eyes

Religious consciousness also awakens within us an amazement at the miraculous nature of world around us and of our own lives, a mystery often veiled in the fog of endless to-do lists and daily routines.

Rabbi Mendel once boasted to his teacher Rabbi Elimelekh that in the evening he saw the angel who rolls away the light before the darkness, and in the morning the angel who rolls away the darkness before the light. “Yes,” sighed Rabbi Elimelekh, “in my youth I saw that too. Later on you don't see those things anymore.”⁵

In July, I was walking along the beach with my daughters as they ran back and forth on the sand in search of treasures. I recalled these words written by my father when I was six and my brother two:

³ Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, “What a Day is Like,” Yom Kippur Eve 1988, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck.

⁴ Bret Stephens, “Straining to Keep Faith with America,” *The New York Times*, 8/31/2018.

⁵ Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hasidim: The Later Masters*, p.125.

Did you ever look through a child's eyes? Watch them at the beach, finding sand dunes to climb, gathering smooth multicolored pebbles and marveling that each is different? Chasing after little birds that hop about across the sand? Collecting sea weed and shells and caterpillars, all with a sense of wonder and discovery? I don't believe any of us are too old for that. To walk out into the bright sunlight, to gaze up at the blue sky...to anticipate with childlike enthusiasm the changing of the seasons and the delights promised by each as we move through the year. All that belongs to us. Nothing can take it away...it is here. A beautiful, open world of natural loveliness, and it is ours.⁶

How often we fail to see it, our heads down, buried in our cellphones, focused on the myriad tasks that consume us. "Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles," Rabbi Chaim Stern lamented. "Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns unconsumed."⁷

In Exodus chapter three, God appeared to Moses in a burning bush. Then, say the rabbis, after Moses lifted his eyes and observed the flame long enough to witness the miracle – that the bush was not burning up – God called to him in the loving voice of his father.⁸ The first word of Leviticus, *Vayikra*, "and God called," ends with a little *aleph* raised above the other letters. If we lift our eyes and pay attention, we too will hear God's call from the wonders of the world we seldom see, and in the voices of those we love. We may not understand what God is saying to us at every moment of our lives, but the voice still speaks and hearing it, we awaken to the countless miracles of God's world.

"O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!" wrote Edna St. Vincent Millay:

Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!

Thy mists that roll and rise!

Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag

And all but cry with colour!...

World, world, I cannot get thee close enough!⁹

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel called this wonderment, "radical amazement." "Grandeur or mystery," he wrote, "is something with which we are confronted everywhere and at all times."¹⁰

Heschel's assertion requires one clarification. The grandeur of creation does not preclude its potentially destructive power, to which Hurricane Florence and Typhoon Mangkhut bear tragic witness. But just as the world's splendor rouses within us our capacity for awe and wonder endowed in us by God, its heartache stirs our compassion and determination also endowed in us by God.

When the prophet Elijah fled for his life from the wicked Jezebel, he wandered the desert until he arrived at Horeb – the same mountain where Moses witnessed the burning bush – and God appeared to him too. "There was a great and mighty wind," the Bible recounts, "but God was not in the wind. After the wind, an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire, a still, small voice."¹¹

⁶ Rabbi Jerome K. Davidson, "The Gifts of Life," Rosh Hashanah Morning 1974, Temple Beth-El of Great Neck.

⁷ Rabbi Chaim Stern, *Gates of Prayer*, p.373.

⁸ *Exodus Rabbah* 3:1.

⁹ Edna St. Vincent Mallay, "God's World."

¹⁰ <http://www.awakin.org/read/view.php?tid=1080>.

¹¹ I Kings 19:11-12.

The still, small voice – that is where God is revealed to us. Not in the tremors that rock our foundations or the winds and rains that break against us, but in the voice of courage that answers them – the fortitude we find within us, the outstretched hands that reach toward us to steady us until we are able to stand on our own again, and the strength we give to others.

Wells of Resilience

As I was looking out at you on Rosh Hashanah, I could not help smiling as I noted the couples I've married, the children whose *B'nei Mitzvah* and Confirmation ceremonies I've celebrated. Some of them are no longer children. And their numbers grow year by year. It's wonderful to see.

But in the same gaze, I counted so many who have endured so much pain: the spouses who have lost partners, the children who have lost parents, the parents who have lost children, the sick, the unemployed, the lonely, families broken apart.

While I believe God's existence is proved in our conviction of what is right and good, and in our appreciation for the beauty of creation including the love of family and friends, nothing more clearly manifests God's presence than courage. In Rabbi Jack Riemer's words: "Human resilience is...the great proof of God's existence....To be defeated by life and to start over again – this...is one of the wonders of the world."¹²

I return to this message so often at this season. We need to hear it. There are times when we feel spent, bereft of hope. "My life is passed in sorrow," the psalmist grieved, "my years in groaning; my strength fails."¹³ *Esa einai el heharim. Me'ayin yavo ezri?* "I lift mine eyes to the mountains. From whence cometh my help?"¹⁴

Once I officiated at a wedding – an elegant affair in one of New York's fine hotels. Standing beneath the *chupah*, I watched with tears in my eyes as the two flower girls marched down the aisle. Neither could have been more than ten. One of them suffered from a deeply debilitating muscular disease and labored with every step. But you would not have known it from the smile on her face. Holding her young cousin tightly with one hand, she cast rose petals about her with the other.

Strength lies in each of us....

And in those around us.

Fred Rogers, remembered in last spring's wonderful film "Won't You Be My Neighbor," told a favorite story from the Special Olympics some years ago:

"For the 100-yard dash...nine contestants...assembled at the starting line and at the sound of the gun...took off. But not long afterward, one...boy stumbled and fell...hurt his knee and began to cry. The other eight children heard him...slowed down, turned around, and ran back....One little girl...bent down and kissed the boy, and said, "This'll make it better." The...boy got up,

¹² Rabbi Jack Riemer, "My Favorite Verse in the Whole Torah," *The World is a Narrow Bridge*, p.103.

¹³ Psalm 31:11.

¹⁴ Psalm 121:1.

and he and the rest of the runners linked their [hands] together, and...walked to the finish line.”¹⁵

The world is full of people ready to say, “I will hold your hand if you let me.” Consider the heroic rescuers of those trapped by Florence’s floodwaters – like Tray Tillman who tied his flat-bottomed boat to the roof of his car and drove through Washington, North Carolina looking for people to help;¹⁶ or Jason Weinmann who rescued those stranded in New Bern with a military transport he bought at an auction – “That’s why I got this thing,” he explained, “to use in times like this.”¹⁷ The nineteenth-century Chasid Menachem Mendel of Rymanov understood: “Human beings are God’s language,” he taught.

But what of those moments when our own strength fails, and darkness conceals those hands reaching out to help us? Then, especially, we must remember Levi Yitzchak’s pronouncement: “There is a God in the world.”

Do you recall the biblical story of Hagar? Forced from her home she wandered the desert with her young son Ishmael. “When their water was gone...she lifted up her voice and wept...[when suddenly] God opened her eyes and she beheld a well.”¹⁸ The rabbis explain: God did not miraculously create this well. It was there from the beginning. God only opened Hagar’s eyes so she could see it and draw life from it. We may think we are alone. We are not! Sources of strength are ever-present – here, now, always. We have only but to lift our eyes and see.

A poet writes:

here i stand
barefoot on the rocks...
the waves crash against me
i will not fall

i face the violent sea
it seeks to cut me down
like so much else in my life

i summon the energy
of the radiant sun
which the clouds spitefully cover

i am on my own
yet not alone

my strength comes from within
and from above

¹⁵ Fred Rogers, 2002 Dartmouth Commencement Address.

¹⁶ Jack Healy and Sheri Fink, “Torrents of Water in Towns Across the Carolinas. And a Guy with a Boat,” *The New York Times*, 9/15/2018.

¹⁷ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/15/us/hurricane-florence-rescues/index.html>.

¹⁸ Gen 21:15-19.

let the ocean levels rise
i shall not be drowned

should my foundation be destroyed
i'll stand on my own two feet

lightning sometimes strikes twice
it won't burn me
because i'm not afraid
because i believe.¹⁹

Emanu-El, "God is with Us"

In a poignant chapter in the book of Exodus, Moses exhibits a crisis of faith. He has just beheld the Israelites worshipping the golden calf. Dismayed and despondent, he seeks the reassurance that only a personal encounter with God can provide. "Oh, let me behold Your Presence," he pleads. Yet God answers: "Though I will make all My goodness pass before you...and the grace that I grant and the compassion that I show...you cannot see My face....[But] see, there is a place near Me. Station yourself on the rock and, as My Presence passes by...you will see My back."²⁰

Centuries of commentators have puzzled over God's meaning. The *Chatam Sofer* offered a most beautiful reading. Recognizing that "my back," *achorai*, could also be understood temporally as "my afterward," he interpreted God's response to Moses as this: "You cannot see Me in the moments of your life as you live them, but you can see where I have been." Witness My handiwork in your pursuit of truth and kindness, in your thankfulness for the world in all its wonder, and in the strength that flows within you and around you."

"If we understand 'God' to mean the Power that makes these...possible," writes Rabbi Harold Kushner, "the reality of these experiences should bear eloquent witness to the reality of God"²¹...and the reality that *Emanu-El*, "God is with us."

Dear Friends,

We cannot know what the year ahead holds in store for us – we pray it be life and health and happiness. But this much we can know if we choose to believe it: there is a God in the world – a divine presence manifest in our conviction of what is right and good, in our gratitude for those of life's blessings we have neither earned nor made, and in the unyielding human spirit determined to find light even in the darkness and to help others find it too. There is a God in the world, and no one is alone.

Esa einai el heharim. Me'ayin yavo ezri? Ezri me'im Adonai, oseh shamayim va'arets.
"I lift mine eyes unto the mountains. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from Adonai, maker of heaven and earth."²²

¹⁹ Poet unknown.

²⁰ Exodus 33:18-23.

²¹ Rabbi Harold Kushner, *When Children Ask About God*.

²² Psalm 121:1-2.