

The God of the Hebrew Scriptures, according to the Midrash Rabbah to the book of Exodus, had a wondrous ability to appear to the people of Israel in varied and different guises, each appropriate to the needs and circumstances of the particular time and place. At the Sea of Reeds, where the Israelites crossed on dry land and the pursuing Egyptians drowned, when the waters that had receded came back in full force, God appeared as a mighty warrior fighting valiantly against the people's oppressors. At Sinai where the Israelites stood some weeks later to receive the Torah, God appeared in the guise of a schoolteacher patiently instructing the assembled pupils. In the time of Daniel, God appeared as an elder, while, in King Solomon's time, God appeared as the young lover of the people Israel. But no matter how many different guises God assumed, the Midrash emphasizes, the oneness of God is not to be called into question. This is why the first verse of the Decalogue reads "I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." I appear now in different guise than I appeared when you departed from Egypt, but I am one and the same God.

Some, doubtless, would understand the words of the Midrash in literal fashion – that God on those particular occasions took on human form. While I believe that humans can and do act as agents and partners of God, understanding the Midrash literally is a stretch for me. Warrior, teacher, elder, lover for me are poetry, metaphors to depict God's redemptive acts, God's inspiring within us a passion for justice, truth and compassion and teaching us a way of life based on those values, and God's close and ongoing relationship with the people of Israel. Rejecting literalism, however, is no reason to avoid using these poetic expressions. God is a mystery, beyond our ability to articulate using the conventions of human speech. The poetry and imagery of the Scriptures and liturgy possess a beauty and power that enrich our spiritual life and are capable of moving us deeply, without a need to parse the words and explain the metaphors and images. There is no passage, for example, that affects me more at a time of grief and loss than Psalm 23, "the Lord is my shepherd."

The Midrash speaks of the guises through which God's presence is revealed as being appropriate to time and place. So, at this season devoted to self-examination and accountability for our deeds, when we anxiously wonder what lies in store for us during the new year, we think of God as *dayan*, as the judge who knows all our deeds and weighs them in the balance, considering our merits and our demerits before passing judgment on our destiny for the coming

year. Will our verdict be a favorable one? Will we enjoy a *shanah tovah* , a happy and healthy new year? The hymn, *Unetaneh tokef*, which is a centerpiece of the Musaf prayers to be recited later this morning, describes the Heavenly Court in session with even the angels trembling before the throne of divine judgment. Fortunately, for us, this is a tribunal where it is possible, perhaps even expected, for us to throw ourselves on the mercy of the court and to ask for a lenient judgment, which is what we are doing when we sing “*Avinu malkeinu, chaneinu va’aneinu ki en banu ma’asim*” - be gracious to us and answer us, even though we have no deeds to our credit.

*Din* and *rachamim* , justice and mercy, are two terms that have a venerable history within Jewish discourse. Taken together, they are the preeminent theme of these Days of Awe. Our tradition recognizes that both justice and mercy are necessary to the functioning of our world. There has to be accountability for our deeds, disputes have to be adjudicated fairly, wrongdoing has to be deterred and punished, wrongs redressed, and those who have sustained injury or loss at the hands of another compensated. On the other hand, in our own courts of justice we do on occasion recognize mitigating circumstances when mercy is called for. And when it is the Divine judge before Whom we stand, we know that a world based solely on strict justice would be impossible, because none of us, even the most righteous is without blame. Perhaps, it is the human condition or the nature of human society, but our choices are frequently not between absolute good and evil but between greater and lesser evils. When we do good, our motives are often suspect. And even when we have the best of intentions, our piety and our righteousness are flawed and imperfect. Or to paraphrase something that Dr. Heschel once said, “Is there anyone who has fulfilled perfectly the commandments to love our neighbor as ourselves and to love God with all our heart, soul and might?”

Like the aforementioned images of God as warrior, teacher, lover or shepherd, I do not understand the depiction of God as *dayan* , as cosmic judge literally. Nor do I believe that there is a straight-line correlation between my faithfulness to the commandments and the happiness and prosperity I will enjoy in the coming year or between my transgressions and wrongdoing and the adversity that I will suffer. Like it or not, there are too many instances when we have witnessed good people suffering and evil ones prospering. What then might the imagery of a heavenly tribunal and the interplay of *din* and *rachamim* teach us about our condition as flawed

human beings and about our capacity for renewal and for embarking on a new beginning in the new year?

The emphasis on *din* in the liturgy and observance of the Days of Awe exemplifies a moral earnestness that I believe to be one of the crowning glories of our Jewish tradition. It is not our professed beliefs that matter but our deeds for which we are accountable. Too many people – not only in our time but throughout history – have believed that the rules did not apply to them, that power, wealth, or maybe just the circumstance that there was no one around to witness their actions exempted them from having to take ethics or morality into account. Too many are willing to cut corners ethically, if it profits them personally. But we come from a prophetic tradition harking back to ancient times that did not shrink from excoriating those with power when they acted unjustly and did not hesitate to question the piety of those who participated ostentatiously in public worship while oppressing and exploiting their fellow persons. While the rabbis of the Talmud were not themselves prophets, they carried on the prophetic tradition. Much of their deliberation and discussion is focused on questions of ritual, but much of it touched on morality and interpersonal relations, teasing out in minute detail the implications of the prophets' ethical values and ideals for everyday living. When we visualize a God, Who judges us for our actions during the year that has passed, we are affirming that tradition of moral earnestness and accountability.

When we speak of a day of judgment, we are acknowledging the objective reality of right and wrong. I recall having heard the eminent Jewish theologian Eugene Borowitz express this in a very down-to-earth manner: morality and ethics are not simply a matter of subjective personal preference – you like chocolate ice cream, and I like vanilla. Generosity, love, compassion and kindness are right; hatred, violence, theft, exploitation and abuse, apathy and indifference to the well-being of our neighbor are wrong. The former -virtues – fulfill the human potential with which we have been endowed and are supportive of our survival as a species. The latter – evils – are destructive of character and lead to collective misery and dystopia.

While no one can know with certainty how the accumulated weight of his/her good deeds compares to the weight of their transgressions, the rabbis urge us to think of the scales of judgment weighted neither in our favor nor to our discredit but evenly balanced, making each deed henceforth all the more consequential. The notion of a judgment yet to be rendered and

susceptible to being influenced by our actions highlights the importance of every single deed and focuses us not on our regrets about the past nor on our intentions regarding a future that has yet to come into existence but on the only dimension of time over which we have control- the present.

And finally, *din*, a standard of justice of which we inevitably fall short, reminds us that there is always room for improvement. In our striving to live a moral and ethical life, our goal should be not a perfection that is beyond our capability but betterment. We must forge a path between the smugness that tells us that we are where we should be and need not endeavor to grow ethically and the perfectionism that is so daunting and unrealistic that it discourages our efforts.

When we plead for *rachamim*, for compassion, the preeminent argument in our favor is our human frailty and fragility. This is expressed in the words of Psalm 103, “remember that we are but dust”. Our span of years is brief and finite, and inevitably suffering, pain (both physical and emotional) and loss come to each of us. We are subject to temptations that we find difficult to resist – for power, for pleasure, and for possessions. These temptations are personified for the rabbis in the figure of the *yetzer ha-ra* , the evil inclination, necessary as the passion and ambition that are the motivating force driving human affairs, but when unchanneled, capable of leading us into grave wrongdoing. The rabbis knew well the power of the *yetzer*, especially when we have become habituated to heeding its call, and they likened it to a guest who has made himself the master of the house.

*Teshuvah*, repentance or more accurately “returning”, is referenced at the conclusion of *Unetaneh tokef* as a mitigating factor that can elicit God’s *rachamim* and avert an unfavorable judgment. *Teshuvah* begins when we abandon our rationalizations and excuses for the wrongs we have committed, when we acknowledge our responsibility and culpability, and when we feel a sincere sense of regret, the consequence of which is a determination to do our best in the coming year and to avoid repeating in the future the same actions and behaviors that tainted our past. I believe that all of us have things that we regret (I know that I certainly do) – whether regarding a failure to achieve our own potential or about the ways that we have hurt others – and that the spirit of these Days of Awe has the power to inspire within us a determination and a striving to change our ways. Regrettably, it is all too often the case that those good intentions, which bolster

our pleas for *rachamim* at this season of judgment, fall by the wayside in the course of the year, unless we find ways to reinforce them. We pray to God, when judging us, to take into account both our regrets and our good intentions.

Lastly, our tradition teaches us that when we ask God for forgiveness, for mercy and for leniency in judgment, it is our willingness to forgive others and extend compassion to them that makes us worthy of compassion. We can't ask for ourselves what we are unwilling to accord to our fellow person.

This is a season of *cheshbon ha-nefesh*, of taking stock of ourselves and examining our faults and our merits, our strengths and our weaknesses. May we conduct this spiritual inventory over these Ten Days of Penitence with honesty and rigor, affirming the moral and ethical tradition that is our heritage, acknowledging that our deeds count, and accepting responsibility for the wrongs that we have done. May we be worthy and deserving of compassion and forgiveness – not merely because we are frail, imperfect and flawed creatures subject to the vicissitudes of life and vulnerable to temptation – but because we deeply regret our failings, because we are determined to do better in the year to come, and because we who seek *rachamim*, mercy, for ourselves strive to live up to the ideal of who we are supposed to be as Jews – *rachmanin b'nei rachmanim*, the merciful children of merciful ancestors, showing compassion to our fellow persons and to all of God's creation.

May our *din* on this Day of Judgment be tempered by *rachamim*. May the New Year be a time for personal renewal and transformation. And may you and all of your loved ones be inscribed in the book of life.