

Erev RH

Shanah Tovah um'tukah! (A Good and Sweet Year!)

A word or two about Teshuvah, before I begin with the main topic of tonight's sermon. Teshuvah/repentance in Judaism has four steps. First, you have to know that what was done was wrong. Second, you have to acknowledge this in the form of an apology to the person who was damaged by what was done. Third, you have to fix what was broken by what you did wrong. Fourth, you can never repeat that wrong action. Ever.

I will be discussing this in more detail on the second day of Rosh HaShanah. For now, I would like you to remember two things about the process: each of us counts as a person, and our issues with people have to be dealt with as much as possible before we can approach God.

Which brings me to the topic for tonight.

God moments.

This is the name I give to those instants in time when we are aware of God's connection with us and we feel certain about God's existence.

By the way, just to cement the concept that Jewish thought is highly contextualized and appears paradoxical at times, you can be an agnostic and still experience God moments.

I have experienced these moments every so often, and my current opinion is that there are three kinds of activities in which it is easiest to become aware of them.

There is a tale that goes with my first conscious awareness of God moments, and how my particular God moments show up. My first year of Rabbinical School, I was in New York City and Andrea and Samuel were still in Kansas. For various reasons, I wound up not feeling physically well much of the time I was there. At one point, I was feverish for a couple of days. If you have ever been feeling that way, you know that there is a cycle of shivering and sweating, with a lot of focus on breathing and minimizing pain. In the apartment there was no TV; there was no radio. I was rarely up to reading, so my world shrank to my body and my thoughts. After about half a day, I noticed something weird. Sometimes I would endure a bout of shivering, and feel completely drained afterwards. Other times, I would experience the same physical sensations I did when I was shivering, but feel ok afterwards. To put it into alliterative poetic terms, after one set of shivers I was enervated, and after the other I was energized.

In class one day, I was looking a bit ahead and came up with a thought. It was an interpretation I had not heard from anyone else, and it made the text make more sense than it ever had before.

I can't remember if I had the opportunity then to tell anyone about my thought. I can't even be sure that I remembered my thought after the class was over. I do remember feeling a chill, as if a bit feverish, and being energized. I began to notice feeling that same way every so often during services.

Fortunately, God moments are not just about me. They are about everyone. In Pirkei Avot, which can be translated as "some things some sages said" we are informed that the world exists so that these three pillars have a place to function: teaching/learning about the universe and how we deal with it (otherwise known as Torah), self-understanding (otherwise known as prayer), making the world a better place, person by person, through granting kindness in the form of action (otherwise known as deeds of loving-kindness). Each of these areas provides a means through which we can have a God moment.

You will have noticed, perhaps, that my God moments happen during times of Torah and Tefillah. I have yet to feel a God moment when performing deeds of loving-kindness. One conclusion I arrive at from this is that people are different and Judaism is broad enough to have space for all of them.

I'd like to expand a bit on some of the practical implications of this. The moments when a person feels most directly connected to God and to Judaism will be different. Some people's most spiritual moments will be when they are involved in teaching or learning, and they will gravitate towards those events that give them the greatest opportunities to be engaged in those activities. Some people will be uplifted during what many consider to be the normal place for spirituality (for example, right here during the moments that I am not engaged in teaching). Many people are energized when taking care of others.

I know that we are all unique, since we are created in the image of the unique God. There will therefore be types of activities towards which we feel closer, and other types of activities which are difficult for us to engage in, and therefore much less likely to be containers for our personal God moments. Some of us are really strong in one particular area. Some of us are reasonably strong in two areas. Very few of us are strong in all three areas.

Each leg of this tripod is important. When a synagogue states that people's spiritual existence is important, it is important for the synagogue to provide opportunities in all three legs. The synagogue's expectation should never be that each person will feel equally comfortable attending all activities. It is very difficult to do, sometimes, but it is important for each of

us to not look at the empty seats or the numbers of people who used to attend any particular event. It is important for us to work on recognizing and increasing the frequency of our own God moments; it is equally important that we be supportive of others whose God moments may show up during other events.