

Neil Tow

YK Day Sermon 2010/5771

1. *On Yom Kippur we're praying to God to listen to our heartfelt words. And we're wondering if God is listening.* This reminds me of the story of a Jewish man who had become an atheist and was taking a walk through the woods at Campgaw Mountain just a few days ago. 'What majestic trees! What beautiful skies! What beautiful animals!', he said to himself. As he continued walking on the trail he heard a rustling in the bushes. Turning to look, he saw a 7 foot grizzly charging towards him. He ran as fast as he could up the path. Looking over his shoulder he saw that the bear was closing in on him. His heart was pumping frantically and he tried to run even faster. He tripped and fell on the ground. He rolled over to pick himself up but saw the bear raising his paw to take a swipe at him. At that instant the atheist cried out: 'Oh my God!...' Time stopped. The bear froze. The forest was silent. It was then that a bright light shone upon the man and a voice came out of the sky saying: 'You deny my existence for all of these years, teach others I don't exist and even credit creation to a cosmic accident. Do you expect me to help you out? Am I to count you as a believer?' The atheist looked directly into the light. 'It would be hypocritical of me to suddenly ask you to treat me as a Jew now, but perhaps, could you make the BEAR into a Jewish bear, and then maybe he will know the golden rule?' 'Very well,' said the voice. The light went out, and the sounds of the forest resumed. And then the bear slowly lowered his paw, bowed his head and spoke: "*Baruch Atah Ado—nai Elo—henu melech ha'olam, ha'motzi lechem min ha'aretz.*" Maybe God is listening too well...
2. We spoke on Rosh Hashanah about our potential to feel a surge of life and spirit affirming energy through a process of personal growth and discovery in the words and practice of prayer. We explored the challenges of prayer and the wonderfully rich spiritual reserves we have within us.
3. We focused on our role in prayer, but we did not think further about God—our partner in the prayer dialogue. On Yom Kippur the role of God in the prayer dialogue is an issue at the front and center of all our words and thoughts.
4. And one of the tremendous ideas we confront as we pray today is to what extent are our prayers really a dialogue, and can the prayers we offer really have an effect on the Eternal One? For centuries, Jewish thinkers and scholars have struggled with how we, God's creations, could somehow change "God's mind" when it comes to our destiny. If our prayers could have no tangible impact on the Divine, then we might say 'why pray at all'? I imagine that many of us have puzzled over this question

at some level throughout the course of our lives, and that many of us continue to wonder about this issue today.

5. We'll see how the God of the Torah is not the unmoved and unchanging God that we, Western culture, inherited from the Greeks. And we'll follow-through some ways that Jewish thinkers have shown us that our prayers are both needed by God, that prayer is important and must continue. And then we'll think together about how a living relationship with a vibrant, reaching-out God can give us strength in the New Year and can potentially transform ourselves.
6. It's pretty clear in the Torah that God is directly involved, interacts and responds to human beings. It's hard to read the first chapter of Genesis and think anything else. God is present, listens, talks, blesses, punishes.
7. And then we fast forward to the Middle Ages; a time when Jewish scholars studied and were influenced by the classical philosophy of Greece. Professor Will Herberg teaches us the Greek philosophers believed God is "Pure Being, incapable of change, modification, affection or outgoing action."(p61) They taught that God is eternal and unchanging—and the Jewish writers looked at some parts in the Bible that seemed to agree with the way the Greeks put it. The prophet Malachi says, "I, the Lord, do not change."(Malachi 3:6) Professor Herberg argues that our society has in general embraced the Greek idea of God and that this idea has some serious implications for the way we think about ourselves and others as human beings. We'll come back to this.
8. Later generations of Jews felt the impact and influence of the message in Greek philosophy. And even though we can clearly see that the Greek message isn't the one that we have in our Torah, the very personal and involved God in the Torah may make us uncomfortable. We tend to dislike the idea that God even sets the scene, and all the more so we dislike the idea that God directs every action. We also feel uncomfortable that one side of a disagreement could try to parlay God to their side instead of our

own side that we feel is right and good. It feels less than genuine to us when athletes thank God for their victories, as though God must be either a Yankees or a Mets fan, but definitely not both.

9. These points of debate sparked creative thinking and let's explore some answers from the masters of the Hasidic tradition.
10. Rabbi Menahem Mendel of Vitebsk (1730-1788) felt that to be a true servant of God, we simply follow God's will, and that it would be chutzpah to somehow change God's will by even asking for God's mercy. But he says that God still longs for our prayers, so God conceals mercy and puts a desire in us to reach out for it. Then we feel an awakening to ask for God's mercy and compassion—especially on days like RH and YK. God is like a parent who holds back giving just enough so that the child makes a request. God takes pleasure in the sincere outpouring of hope for a real relationship. God's will is to be in relationship with humanity, and our prayers do not change that will. Just the opposite, they make it possible.
11. Rabbi Tzvi Elimelekh of Dinov (1783-1841) also recognized the problem that prayer asks for a change in God's will. He first shares the opinion of the Bal Shem Tov, the founder of the Hasidic movement. Bal Shem Tov taught that prayer doesn't change God's mind. If God has made a judgment against us in return for a sin we committed, our prayers for mercy and forgiveness attach us to a higher plane of existence, and we're transformed into a new being. We avoid the punishment since it was directed only for the person we were before we reached out sincerely to God.
12. Tzvi Elimelekh himself taught a different way to approach the issue at hand. God does not have to alter creation at all. He writes, "At the time of Creation, the Holy One set up with everything He created that their order of functioning might change at certain times and in certain ways, if such and such a thing occurred." His explanation reminds me of the classic Albert Einstein remark, "God does not play dice with the universe." God set up everything with an infinite foresight about possibilities and alterations we might introduce. We still have free will, and certain events result based on our

choices. He sums it up this way, “It is all part of God’s original plan that when a certain individual prays at a given time in a certain way, such and such will happen.”

13. Rabbenu Yonah lived about 500 years before these Hasidic masters and wrote one of the defining books about teshuvah—the repentance and return that we seek on the High Holidays. He teaches that prayer and teshuvah have inherent merit. When we pray and return with a full heart the merit that is in these activities comes forward—and God notices and takes into account all the good things we’ve done in the past. Rabbenu Yonah also teaches us that when we pray, as King David once did, for God to wash us clean from our sins and purify us, we’re really praying for God to look on us as we were before our misdeeds. So again, we don’t change God’s will, we simply remind God that we have done better before and can do so again.
14. Which approach to the question feels the best for each of us? Are we still confused or perplexed by the issue itself? Maybe we have our own personal ways of thinking about how God hears and participates in our prayers. We don’t need to have a final answer for how to think about this issue *today*, but today is an *eit ratzon*, an auspicious time to *begin* to grapple with this question of faith.
15. It is on Yom Kippur that we believe God is making a judgment about our lives and the lives of the people as a whole. Our Torah and our prayers on this Shabbat suggest that God is directly involved in the unfolding events of our lives and history. It is tenuous and challenging to exist in a world with the reality of this kind of Divine active involvement. We talked about the many ways we can avoid the problem of trying to change God’s will in the course of events. But Professor Will Herberg strongly advocates that we take the risk of the leap of faith in the personal and active Living God/*Elo-him Chayim* of our tradition, even though we could make the argument that the Rabbis of the Talmud and the great Maimonides challenged (but did not completely reject) this active, personal God. Herberg argues that the risks of not taking this leap of faith are far worse than the alternative.

16. He suggests the more fundamental reason we've accepted this idea of God is that our culture displays a strong anti-personalistic bias. He writes, "The whole tendency of mechanistic science and technology in the past two centuries has been to 'dehumanize' our thinking and to imbue us with the conviction that personality is merely subjective..." That we are but a cog in the cosmic wheel. And then we picture God the same way. But how can it be that God, the highest reality, is relegated to being a tendency, a field, or a force in the language of science...Denying personality to God, is by extension a denial of the reality and worth of personality in human beings.
17. Herberg makes a strong argument. We might disagree. We might say that with the social networking revolution that technology has moved into the highly personal realm, that Facebook and Twitter and constant connection via cell phone have increased our *personal* presence in the world. But all these things are not *us*, they are a skin or avatar for the real person who gives them information and meaning. Each of us is much much more than our Facebook profile communicates. We are not information streams, and our lives are filled with greater issues, dilemmas, and paradoxes than any digital media could possibly convey.
18. Herberg makes the same argument about God. God cannot be simply an impersonal force because the Torah that teaches us about God tells us that God is at once actively involved in history and beyond everything in nature and history. If God is *only* an impersonal unchanging force, like a law of physics, then we're at risk of seeing existence itself as impersonal and human beings as part of that gray, impersonal collective. Herberg was writing in 1951—he knew what happened when human beings became dehumanized and numbered like a nameless herd.
19. We live in a world that has this to say: If we talk to God we're praying, if God talks to us, we must be crazy. Believing in a Living, Active God is a risk in a world where so many tyrants continue to abuse this image for destruction and personal benefit. But don't we take a risk of belief and faith with every important belief we hold and in every significant activity we pursue? We do this each time we wake up

in the morning and begin our day. We do it each time we go to work and follow through on a project, each time we play on a sports team, each time we bring a new child into the world or mentor and teach students. Belief and faith in a God with a live, active personality and connection to humanity is a risk too, but it's one that reaffirms the personality in each of us.

20. That's why we have to create a world in which we truly see each human being as created *btzelem Elo'kim*, in the image of God—endowed with a spark of what we call personality that is a reflection of and gift from *M'kor ha'Chayim* the Source of Life. Only this view can help us feel the exciting and dream-inspiring sense that we are each amazing creations with unique personalities, unique gifts, unique contributions that we make to the world whether we're aware or unaware of these things. Knowing all this can give us a deep sense of thankfulness, a sense of gratitude for the gifts of being able to live *my* life however easy or difficult it may be from one day to the next. Only this view reaffirms the holiness of life itself.
21. Yom Kippur, the day of at-one-ment, the day of re-connecting with our Parent our Creator in Heaven. It's as important as it ever was. If the tendency in our world has been to continue to undermine the power of the human personality in favor of a scientific theory to explain it all, and rule out a God personally involved in the unfolding of events, then today is a day to reclaim the power of the person. Today is a day to bridge the gap between each of us and the universe filling personality that is God. Today is the day to take up the suggestion of Walt Whitman and sound our barbaric yawp over the rooftops of the world! Today is a day to confront the reality that the sins and mistakes we've made this past year are not illusions or impersonal forces. They're real and they happened between people, and that we must be accountable for them. And Yom Kippur is the day we deny ourselves food and some other pleasant things of daily existence not to deny that we're human, not to show that we ourselves are illusions or that we want to escape this world, no, we do all this to *reaffirm in the*

*strongest possible way that we are human beings and that we have a power within each unique person, each of us, to recognize our humanity.*

22. As the Torah teaches, *We, all of us are here, and we are alive! Alive with hope, alive with longing for more stable times in which to live for ourselves and the next generation, alive with a yearning to be recognized, validated, and supported through our life journeys. Today is the day for the recognition of that desire—*And however we seek to explain God's role in our prayers and the events of our lives, we know that God is somehow actively seeking us just as we are actively seeking at the same time.

23. May we all have a tzom kal, an easy fast, and May we all be written and sealed in the Book of Life.

*Gmar ketivah ve'chatimah Tovah! Amen.*