

KOL NIDRE 2026

Congregation Beth Shalom of Napa Valley

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Over the years, I've often sought God
through extreme experiences, on mountain peaks,
and in exotic lands.//

As a Jew, & as a congregational rabbi
for most of my professional life,
that can, of course, pose certain problems.//

Judaism is a religious tradition
in which *peoplehood* is a powerful feature
and a primary focus.//

So there is a basic disconnect

between serving as the spiritual leader
of a Jewish community & being pulled so forcefully
toward solitary adventures.//

I've struggled for three decades to make peace
between the call of the wild
and the call of my faith.//

And because I've frequently looked
for a sense of spiritual connection,
not in human relationships,
but through encounters with the sublime,
I have often felt, & on occasion continue to feel,
like an outlier among my own people.//

My path has sometimes been a lonely one,
but it has felt authentic to me.//

Perhaps I have not felt comfortable enough
to expose my vulnerability to others;
maybe I've been afraid of letting go of control.//

Whatever the reason,
it has always been easier for me
to seek adventures *without*, rather than within.//

While I have tried to be authentic to myself,
one experience showed me the limits
of my solitary journey—

and the rewards of a journey with another person.//

Several years into my tenure

as the rabbi of The New Shul in Manhattan,

I traveled one summer to the Faroe Islands.//

The Faroes are an archipelago of islands

in the North Atlantic,

roughly midway between Norway & Iceland.//

Today they're a territory of Denmark,

but the Faroes were first settled by Irish monks,

followed by the Vikings.//

They are a place of stark, raw beauty,

and they are sparsely populated.//

I hiked over hills so verdant & misty
they seemed otherworldly,
and along sheer cliffs dotted with puffins
and surrounded by grey seals and pilot whales.//
There was a quiet but intense *spirituality*
that suffused the land & the sea:
it was a spirituality of solitude.//

I felt a kinship with that sense of solitariness.//
It didn't exactly make me feel uplifted,
but it did seem to speak to a part of my soul
that only nature could.//

When I returned to New York City
at the end of the summer, one of my first tasks
as a congregational rabbi
was to welcome new members who had joined
our synagogue.//

One of them, Tonda, was a literary agent
and a self-proclaimed atheist & provocateur.//

We instantly took a liking to each other.//

If we weren't discussing the ever-changing state
of the publishing industry, we were talking about—
or, more accurately, arguing over—

the existence of God.//

Tonda's challenges to theism were thoughtful

and sound, & I offered a defense of my belief,

and a critique of atheism,

that I think she found equally compelling.//

Our views on God couldn't have been more different

and divergent, but our theological exchanges

(at the synagogue, at restaurants, & over martinis)

were always enlightening & fun.//

I respected Tonda, & I knew that she respected me.//

Tonda was smart, & it was obvious

that she had thought about spiritual matters

for a very long time.//

Perhaps for that reason, I kept debating her

because I wanted to “win,”

to bring over this new congregant

to the side of truth.//

Though we saw validity in each other’s arguments,

it became increasingly clear as time went on

that neither of us was going to budge

from our fundamental positions.//

And it raised a larger issue for me:

What is, or ought to be, my job as a rabbi

within the context of a spiritual community?//

Should my conversations, teachings, & sermons

be devoted to promoting the Jewish belief in God?//

I eventually came to see the folly of my mission,

how I'd misunderstood & misperceived

the true nature of my work as a spiritual leader.//

I'd been so busy debating & arguing with Tonda

about God's existence

that I'd hidden from myself the fact

that our engagement *itself* was spiritual.//

The distance between the two of us was not vast,

and our separation was mostly illusory.//

I respected, even loved Tonda,

and I saw the divine image that was within her—

even if she herself adamantly denied its existence.//

Tonda & I had formed a sacred connection,

an “I-thou” relationship.//

It wasn’t the spirituality of solitude

that I’d experienced in the Faroe Islands—

it was a spirituality of a completely different order.//

Despite the apparent, surface divide between us,

we were bound by a faith tradition

anchored in dialogue rather than dogma;

by an iconoclastic impulse to overturn decorum

in pursuit of knowledge & wisdom;

by an embrace of pluralism

and a commitment to community,
even if some of our particular views
(and our respective levels of commitment to Judaism)
differed in significant ways.//

It was strange for me to feel that my soul
was being nourished, not by nature,
but by another human being—
it was new & refreshing.//

And it was, I came to realize, much less lonely.//

Since my experience with Tonda,
I've tried to understand "Torah" in its broadest sense,

as an impassioned & *communal* search

for meaning & purpose.//

I have attempted to become more tolerant & open,

not only to divergent opinions,

but also to the very presence of other people

on my spiritual path—

to see them not as threats to my privacy,

but as *assets* to my inner development.//

When I succeed—and it is not easy—

I am often reminded of a verse from *Pirke Avot*,

a teaching that says far more about relationships

than about mountaintops or oceans:

“When two people sit together

and exchange words of Torah,
then the divine presence dwells with them.”//

One of the primary jobs of a congregational rabbi
is to teach congregants;
but congregants often teach *us* as well,
and that has certainly been the case for me
throughout my rabbinic career.//
I know that many of you here at CBS are atheists,
like Tonda was,
and I readily concede that atheism
presents a robust challenge to traditional Judaism
and our normative approach to viewing the world.//

So how *do* we find God?//

That is one of the great questions in our time—

but it has always been that way.//

Suffering, injustice, & the horrors of war

make it hard to see or believe in a higher power;

yet this is nothing new.//

In Psalm 22, we read what many of us today

would consider one of the earliest expressions

of doubt, even atheism.//

The author says, in apparent despair & anguish,

“My God, my God,

why have you abandoned me?" //

We don't know what exactly the context was

for these words,

or what motivated a question of such pathos

and pain. //

But this and other passages from the Bible

gave rise to the concept of *hester panim*,

the idea of God's "hiddenness" in the world. //

One way of interpreting *hester panim* is linked

with perception. //

The omniscient, omnipotent,

and omnibenevolent God of religious tradition

is also usually thought of

as *omnipresent*—God never “hides” at all.//

What does get clouded, or at times blinded,

is only our *perception* of God’s presence.//

We may not be able to see God through the fog

and shadows of the human condition,

but that doesn’t mean that God is not there.//

Look at the example of Jacob in the book of Genesis.//

Midway through the biblical book,

the patriarch is in a very dark place.//

Jacob is on the run from his brother Esau’s wrath,

after having stolen both his birthright

and their father's blessing;

Jacob is afraid & alone.//

God has been absent from the narrative

for almost three chapters and,

Jacob surely perceives, from his own life as well.//

On his long, harrowing journey from Beersheba

(site of his immoral past)

to Haran (site of his uncertain future),

Jacob comes upon "a certain place"

and stops for the night.//

Filled with anxiety & a sense of desolation,

Jacob places a stone under his head as a pillow,

falls asleep, & has a dream.//

He sees a *sulam*, or a ladder or ramp, that reaches

from the earth to the sky,

and “angels of God were going up and down on it.”//

In the dream, God stands next to Jacob,

and God assures him that he will not be abandoned:

“I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac: the ground on which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. . . . Remember, I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.” (Gen. 28:13–15)

While Jacob does not verbalize his fears
or his sense of being forsaken by God,
these words certainly suggest
that God is well aware of the future patriarch's
psycho-spiritual condition.//

God's promise links the destiny of Jacob
to that of his father & grandfather,
offers Jacob reassurance that God is
and will be with him, and affirms a future
of divine protection.//

After this revelatory and inspiring message,
Jacob has an epiphany:

“Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, ‘Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!’ Shaken, he said, ‘How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God, and that is the gateway to heaven.’ Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up as a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He named that site Beit El.” (Gen. 28:16–19)

Jacob’s dream, ironically, “wakes” him
to God’s presence in his life.//

The shaken Jacob concedes his blindness
and gains a fresh perception of reality—

his eyes are now open.//

The object that seemed more like a gravestone
than a pillow suddenly transforms into an altar;
Jacob's metaphorical death
leads to his spiritual rebirth.//

When Jacob acknowledges
that God was never truly "hidden,"
when the illusion of God's absence is shattered
with the dawn,

Jacob is ready to continue on his journey.//

Shortly after this scene, several positive,
even *epic* events occur in Jacob's life:
he wrestles to a stalemate

with a powerful & mysterious being,
receives a sacred blessing,
becomes Israel,
reconciles with Esau,
and moves forward as the next leader of his people.//

The experience of *hester panim*
is connected to who we are
and the way we view the world.//

While our sense of God's absence
is the result of our own misperception,
that perception can be changed.//

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk,
an important & provocative Hasidic mystic,
asks the question, “Where is God?”//

He then provides an answer:

“In the place where God is given entry.”//

The Kotsker Rebbe also offers this teaching:

“One who does not see the Omnipresent
in *every* place will not see him in *any* place.”//

Whether or not God is present in our lives
is ultimately up to us.//

The paradox of a transcendent deity
is that even as God is hidden from the world,

God is present everywhere in it.//

If we can't *feel* God,

it's because we're not open enough

for God to enter our souls.//

If we can't *see* God,

it's not because we're looking in the wrong places,

but because we're not looking with correct vision.//

My central message tonight, on this Kol Nidre,

is directed to believers & non-believers alike:

if God seems absent or hidden in your life,

don't despair, get angry, or be dismissive.//

There are multiple pathways to God,

and many & varied ways

to experience spirituality.//

For some, it will take place alone & in nature;

for others, it will occur through relationships,

or in community—

there is room for *all* of us in the tent of Judaism.//

We just need to stay open-minded,

be patient, look harder,

and give our tradition the benefit of the doubt.//

This is easier said than done, I know,

but it is a sacred opportunity for all of us to evolve,

and to grow, in the new year ahead.//
