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“Something Bigger”

Prologue:

One of the defining prayers for these holy days, *Unetanneh Tokef*, troubles the still waters of my soul, “On Rosh Hashanah it will be inscribed and on Yom Kippur it will be sealed – how many will pass from the earth and how many will be created; who will live and who will die, who will be impoverished and who will be enriched.”

Our existence is so uncertain.

A year ago, the day before Rosh Hashanah, we learned my wife Liz had breast cancer. The day after Yom Kippur we learned it was invasive and aggressive. Last Yom Kippur, the language of the *Unetanneh Tokef* prayer, “who will live and who will die” pierced my heart like a rusty nail. Was the year ahead Liz’s year to live or die?

Blessedly, Liz is now healthy. Her response to the treatment was excellent. Her courage, the love of our friends, family and this community, and the joyous mayhem of our boys propelled us through a hard year.

Thank you – to this community – to each of you who brought a meal – who wished us well – who prayed for Liz – to my colleagues and to the board who supported us. Thank you.

Thank God that year is behind us.

Thank God Liz is healthy.

Thank God.

We say that all the time but what is the God we are thanking? And when you recite the *Unetanneh Tokef*, what is the God you are praying to?

A question I ask myself daily is, “where is God in my life?”

Today I want to ask you, “Where is God in your life?”

Awkward, right?

As those who know me have discovered, when given the opportunity, I love creating awkward moments, ideally triggering moments of meaning, awareness, gratitude. Personally, I don’t think of them as awkward, just not normative. Generally we underestimate how powerful we are as forces of holiness and love. But I’m a rabbi, so of course, this is what I think.

So let me ask again: Where is God in your life?

When I arrived here, I met with a long-time member of this congregation. We kibitzed a bit about our families and living in Los Angeles, and then, when our food arrived, I asked, “How has your relationship with God changed over the course of your time at LBT?” She paused, jaw lowering slowly, then quickly closing. Then, tilting her head down a bit while looking straight into my eyes, she said with a reproving tone, “That... is not an appropriate question for a first meeting.”

Look, I get it. That is the Judaism with which I was reared. But, why is it improper to ask an educated, deeply engaged Jew, about her relationship with the Divine?

As liberal Jews, we are at ease picking and choosing different elements of the “tradition” yet so few of us are at ease talking about God. We are comfortable acknowledging spiritual moments in nature or contemplation, at a concert, when connecting deeply with another, even eating a perfect piece of sushi.

But seeing any or all of those moments as an encounter with the Divine? That is just too much, beyond the pale for us to see, and apparently even for us to talk about. Please understand, my desire is to discuss belief with you, not to convince you of any particular set of beliefs. Believe or don’t believe. What matters to me, is that we are thorough and thoughtful about something as important, as our significance, in the grander scheme of life itself. Ideally, we are as curious and committed to exploring the centrality of Something Bigger as we are to finding the best home, a new car, or even a mate.

Believing, whatever that is, challenges us to carry the weight of responsibility to expand our perimeter beyond those who are proximate, while inviting us to receive a boundless love. Today, many of us write off the idea of feeling tethered to Something Bigger as wasteful, unsophisticated, or antithetical to our liberal Jewish identity. Ironically, Socrates, on trial for his lack of belief in God said, “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Today, belief in God is too rarely investigated.

Some of that is surely the culture into which we were born, and therefore we sometimes stop questioning it with fresh eyes. I recall as a young teen being homophobic and racially prejudiced. Just being honest here. Such prejudices were omnipresent among my fellow teens.

But I lived, I learned, I made new friends, I changed. I surely wouldn't suggest that I've left all of my judgments fully behind me. Nobody can. But I've changed.

As Rabbi Berney, reminded us so powerfully on Erev Rosh Hashanah, there are societal patterns and behaviors that reinforce forms of oppression, some of which we are conscious of, others less so. To question and reimagine something as fundamental as belief in Something Bigger, necessitates a shaking of that foundation.

Over this past year, my foundation was shaken time and time again. Connecting to Something Bigger buoyed me personally, politically, and spiritually. But how I got there was not through the God of the Torah. I've never been a fan of that God: unpredictable, vengeful, quick to anger, slow to forgive, distant, and sometimes absent.

The God of the Torah comes across about as loveable as a schoolyard bully, and we have enough bullies in our world. If God is so powerful – why so much death, war, and disease? Why would Liz have cancer? Why the Holocaust? No wonder so many of us are atheists, agnostics, or just uncomfortable embracing that Divine representation.

Of course, this is the same God that liberates us, provides manna and water, reveals Torah at Sinai, and delivers us, eventually, to the Promised Land. Every week, we take out this sacred scroll, we venerate, study, and even kiss it. And yet there it is, describing a God that so few of us believe in... It's complicated!

I want to explore a re-imagining of the Divine in our lives and the implications for how we live, love, and relate to one another and take responsibility for our world.

We can still hold the Torah dear to our souls – a blueprint for justice, peace, wisdom, and compassion, particularly in its highest reaching passages – while giving ourselves, as the tradition models, the leeway to seek a divine, transcendent source, that we can embrace, and that embraces us.

Anyone walking out? Ok, let's explore.

In my grappling with God, I encountered process theology which allowed me to reset my relationship with God. It was introduced to me by Rabbi Bradley Artson, the Dean at American Jewish University, just a couple miles up the hill.

In process theology our lives, our choices, our actions, are the process through which God is present in the world. Artson summarizes, "God is not a bully in the sky who is in complete control of everything, and we and the rest of the cosmos are just passive recipients... That in fact, is a projection of human cruelty onto the cosmos. It can be true of human rulers, it is not true of our universe. We are experiences of the world and creators of experience. So that each of us become sources of encounter for each other... And God is not the exception to this great shimmering interactive dynamism, God is the one who makes it possible. The one who facilitates all relations and all connections."

In process theology – the divine is not all powerful but it is you, me, us – we are shaping and constructing the world in which we live. The responsibility of our every action is amplified – to an almost holy degree.

## Ch. 1 - Evolving Nature of God

This reminds me of the excellent podcast, S-town, the reporter Brian Reed, reflects on the complexity with which the protagonist fixes antique clocks, “When an antique clock breaks, a clock that’s been telling time for two hundred or three hundred years, fixing it can be a real puzzle. An old clock like that is handmade by someone... To make the job even trickier, you often can’t tell what’s been done to a clock over hundreds of years... the few people left in the world who know how to do this kind of thing, rely on what are often called “witness marks” to guide their way. A witness mark could be a small dent, a hole that once held a screw... They are clues to what was in the clockmaker’s mind when he first created the thing.” (Brian Reed, S-Town)

It makes me wonder: What are the “witness marks” on the God each of us inherited?

Today, on Yom Kippur, as we take stock of our lives, we are called to look for those marks, to question who tinkered with it before and why. Critically, we can’t do *teshuvah*, to return to our best selves, if we don’t investigate, the “witness marks” on our own souls and on the God we inherited. In our tradition, the all-powerful, God of miracles, was for the most part cast aside by the upstart rabbis roughly 1800 years ago. They looked at the witness marks, and they spent centuries tinkering without a manual, breathing new life into it.

## Ch. 2 - Us as Divine

What we know as Judaism today, informed by the Torah, is primarily a product of rabbis and sages, the earliest of whom lived about a thousand years after the Torah was written. When we, as liberal Jews, choose how we seek to be Jewish, we are making choices out of the Judaism of the rabbis, not the the Torah. The laws of *kashrut*, the blessing for Shabbat candlelighting, the Passover seder, our beloved Friday night Kabbalat Shabbat service all came from the sages, not instructions in the Torah. Intentionally, and methodically, the rabbinic tradition reframes Jewish practice as described in the Torah – creating the roadmap for how to be Jewish. So if you think we are Judaism’s first reformers, think again. It may seem linear now, but it never has been. We are an evolving tradition.

In one defining story in the Talmud, a gaggle of rabbis unite against a lone dissenting rabbi.

They are debating if a particular oven is kosher. They say the words of the rabbis were so fierce and taut with anger that they wrap around the oven like a snake. The fight is not ultimately about what is kosher, but rather about who has authority to decide.

In this Talmudic discourse, every argument advanced by the lone rabbi, Rabbi Eliezer, is rejected by the other rabbis.

Desperate, Rabbi Eliezer said to the Sages: "If the law follows my opinion, this carob tree shall prove it." And just like that, the carob tree was magically uprooted from its place one hundred cubits...

The Sages brush off this miracle saying to Rabbi Eliezer: "We do not bring proof from a carob tree." And the argument rages on.

Finally, Rabbi Eliezer said to the Sages: "If the law follows my opinion it shall be proved from heaven."

And boom... a heavenly voice (*Bat kol*) suddenly rang out, saying, "Why are you not listening to Rabbi Eliezer, since the law always follows his opinion!"

Surely, that must have turned the rabbis' heads, right? Not so much. One of the rabbis simply stood up and said: *Lo b'shamayim hi*, "It is not in heaven."

Then, as this is a Jewish text, the question is asked, "What is meant by '*Lo b'shamayim hi*' – 'It is not in heaven'?"

A second rabbi adds: For since the Torah was already given on Mount Sinai we do not care about a heavenly voice (*Bat kol*).

The talmudic term for that is, Rabbinic Mic Drop!

The rabbis are making clear that humans are the final voice, no heavenly voice, no flying carob trees, no miracles. The rabbis adjudicate what it means to be Jewish, to do Jewish, to do the holy work of bringing God into the world through *mitzvot*. They take a verse from the Torah we will be reading tomorrow from Deuteronomy – the verse Moses communicates to the Israelites before they reach the promised land without him, "*Lo b'shamayim hi*, it is not in heaven."

The Torah is not too baffling for you, or beyond your reach. No, this thing is very close to you, in your heart and on your lips. (Deuteronomy 30:11-14)

This Talmudic scene concludes with another rabbi having a sidebar conversation with none other than the Prophet and Mystic Elijah. This rabbi asks Elijah, "What did God do at that moment?" Did God allow this rejection of the heavenly voice?"

Elijah responds: "God was laughing and said, 'My children have defeated me, My children have defeated me.'"

Make no mistake: That is laughter of joy, of ecstasy. Not that God has lost God's power, but that humans have taken on divine responsibility for their lives, for this world.

This is just one of the “witness marks” you have inherited, a hole that once held a screw, demonstrating our tradition’s shift from God’s presence being distant to imminent, from all-powerful to a God as a theatre goer with really good seats.

### Ch. 3 - Oneness

And if we keep looking, we’ll find more witness marks, revealing more growth and evolution in the God our ancestors wished to pass down to us.

Years ago, while kayaking in southeast Alaska, I encountered a mountain of a tree which grows to be 300 feet tall and 16 feet in diameter. This is the Sitka spruce. Within its cells, are the cells of salmon that swim in nearby waters. When bears catch and devour salmon they leave the carcasses in the woods which in turn feed eagles, ravens, gulls, and crow. The droppings from these birds spread nitrogen. Fifty percent of the total nitrogen propelling the Sitka spruce’s growth comes from the salmon. The salmon is in the tree like we are all in each others’ lives, propelling our growth. (<https://www.hakaimagazine.com/article-long/salmon-trees>)

Daniel Matt, one of today’s leading scholars on Jewish mystical texts, who was LBT’s Scholar-in-Residence a few years ago, writes, “What is the self? It’s hard to pin down... Whether we remember it or not, there was a time in each of our lives just a few decades ago – when we didn’t yet know how to differentiate between internal and external, between self and other. Then one day, we spoke the magic word “I,” and everything changed.”

Is it so hard to imagine that everything is interconnected and our actions bring divine energy into the world? What defines our awareness, our consciousness of what is separate and what is one? Matt writes, “Conscious experience is caused by electro-chemical interactions between billions of neurons... While it appears to be continuous, in fact, consciousness is discontinuous and gappy... We have learned to imagine that at our core there is a separate, conscious entity, but this is a fiction, a wondrous and necessary fiction, a constructed feature of our mental landscape. It is not that we are less than a self; we are more. We are part of the oneness.”

Now, pause for a moment and take it in.

The provocation of the oneness of God, of reclaiming God as a unifying force of love, is the agitation, really the obligation, to draw close to others. To move into and beyond our own suffering. To overcome our sense of disconnection. To question, at our core, how do I allocate my time between caring for my family and caring for those I don’t know.

Most of us lack proximity to poverty, to those living in fear of deportation, to the 1.4 million people in LA County who do not know where their next meal is coming from, to those who face daily acts of discrimination and abuse. LA has perfected isolation and separation.

Even when we go to a different neighborhood, we remain cocooned in our own vehicle, safe from rubbing elbows with “the other,” the “stranger.”

A counter perspective was modeled to a group of Leo Baeckers who recently went to Dolores Mission Catholic Church to meet with the staff and residents of a shelter for undocumented homeless men and women. Our congregants were gobsmacked by the sense of calling among the shelter staff to care for the most vulnerable, to make personal sacrifices in order to serve this community. One staff member simply said, “The poor take care of the poorest.”

Where is your God, in that statement?

Even more heartbreaking was when the staff said, “It would be great if you came to visit regularly. Honestly, most of our guests, they feel hated. Just sitting with them, sharing stories, would mean the world to them.” But we haven’t come to visit them regularly... at least not yet. What comforts might we be willing to surrender if it meant others would be rescued from suffering, and alleviate our isolation?

What luxury features on our cars, rooms in our homes, vacations abroad, private school for our kids, meals out?

Coming out of the visit to Dolores Mission, a congregant lovingly agitated me, “How do we push ourselves beyond convenience?”

- How many of us have a close friend who is undocumented? Yet, there are almost 1 million undocumented individuals in LA County.
- Who among us regularly invites over African-Americans or Latinos for a Shabbat meal?
- Who among us has been to a mosque or a church in the past twelve months, never mind to temple!
- Ok, this one will be a stretch; who here among our more liberal worshipers has close friends who are Republicans?

As Rabbi Chasen encouraged on Rosh Hashanah morning, could we open up to a new reality to decrease our own isolation, and demonization of the other?

Sylvia Boorstein, a deeply Jewish Buddhist teacher writes, “Suppose people everywhere, simultaneously, stopped what they were doing and paid attention for only so long as it took to recognize their shared humanity. Surely the heartbreak of the world’s pain, visible to all, would convert everyone to kindness.”

Those of you who care about social action but long ago rejected God, take note; the impulse to make the world more just for the disadvantaged and downtrodden doesn't come from our national values.

If anything, our national values lionize the free market and the notion that, so long as I haven't cheated anybody, I am entitled to whatever my hard work and talent can get me.

Rather, it's our Jewish religious values, our sense that we are not so separate from those who suffer, our sense that we are part of the same Oneness, the same *Echad*... that is the reason for doing justice.

Let's go back to The *Unetanneh Tokef* prayer, which shook my soul last year:

וּנְתַנֶּה תְּקוּף קְדִישַׁת הַיּוֹם כִּי הוּא נוֹרָא וְאִיּוֹם

"Let us now relate the power of this day's holiness, for it is awesome and fearsome."

When we're staring at our own mortality, as we all do on Yom Kippur, as I did as Liz's very life seemed to lay in the balance, we discover we are all absolutely and inescapably a part of the Oneness.

Everything is temporary, all in desperate need of hands to pull us upward, all needing to receive love and generosity.

I want to invite you to close your eyes for two minutes, or rest them softly a few feet in front of you. Warning, awkwardness ahead.

With your eyes closed, take three deep cleansing breathes. This is a day of cleansing, of compassion.

Notice the quiet... the rising and falling of your breath. Let your body soften, and settle into your seat.

Informed by my teacher and friend Rabbi Sheila Weinberg, I want you to, as you are willing, as you are able, to call to mind a moment when you felt profoundly loved, totally safe; feel the texture of the moment, the energy around you, notice the people surrounding you.

Allow that feeling to connect with you in the depth of your being, affirming your unconditional worth, wishing you deeply well. For a little while, just receive the loving energy of that moment into your whole body and mind – opening to it, accepting it, allowing it. Every part of you loved in its very being.

This capacity to be loved, to receive love, helps us to recognize our capacity to connect with The One, with Something Bigger, whatever that is for you. This love primes us to bring out our capacity to love – to love God, to love "the other," to love "the stranger," and to love the self... to feel that we are all a part of the same One.

This love allows us to awaken to our capacity to be with others or with a divine energy, without being hijacked or constricted by habits, limited ideas and impressions of who we are, and who they are.

We learn the natural openness of heart and mind from which love flows. We see the limitations without believing them – we allow them to release.

If we believe *lo b'shamayim hi* – that the Torah is not in heaven, that God is not in heaven, separate and removed from us – then explore the question, “Where is God in my life?”

May this be a year of love, kindness, connection, and encounters with the sublime and Divine. May we see the witness marks of the divine in our lives and embrace our capacity to connect with the One. *Lo b'shamayim hi*, it's not far away. It's here. Right here. In you. In me. It IS us all.