

It's Not Good For Man to be Alone, and it's Not Good for God to be Alone, Either

How are you?

I'm really asking. How are you?

I know that some of you are responding in that way so ingrained in us from childhood that the answer to that question should always be the same. It should be, "I'm good. How are you?"

But I want you to take an extra moment to answer that question as honestly as you possibly can. It's just you and me, or you know what? You can even pretend I'm not here and it's just you and God. And I'll ask again, with a full and open heart...

How are you?

We're not all going to be feeling the same way of course. Some of us really are just... good. Maybe a little tired, maybe a little inconvenienced, but you know... good. But I also know that there are many of us, more than usual, who are answering that question right now in a much more complicated way than on High Holidays past.

I know I am. I know that with the joy that comes with this day, the appreciation, the gratitude, the love... there's also some serious heartbreak. I miss you, I miss seeing you, I miss your hugs, I miss your handshakes, your high fives. I miss sharing Seven Layer cake with you. I even miss you pulling me aside and telling me what you really thought of my sermon. I do.

And there's a lot more, but this isn't about me. Not right now. Right now, I'm asking you, and God is asking you. The sanctity of this day is asking you...

How are you?

One of the most challenging aspects of the *Chagim*, of the High Holy Days, is that we are asked to answer that question while shifting our liturgical language in a way that is intended to fill us with awe, wonder, and a divine sense of trembling. But what we need to wrestle with is what to do when that linguistic shift isn't all that we need or what God needs from our prayer.

During these *yamim noraim*, these Days of Awe, you'll notice that throughout our prayers we change the Hebrew word from El, or God, to Melech, or King. *Ha El Ha Kadosh*, becomes *Ha Melech HaKadosh*, Holy God to Holy King. Rather than beginning *Shacharit* with *Ha El B'Ta'ah'tzumot Uzecha*, like on Shabbat or other holidays, we start with the chanting of *Ha'Melech*. The language transforms. And so can our conversation with the Divine.

And to be sure, there are times for that royal language. During the Geonic Period and into the Middle Ages when the liturgy that we know today was being shaped and formed, the image of God as king was incredibly fitting. In the lands where our ancestors lived, it was the king who provided the land with sustenance, with safety, and pride and with identity. And so coming before the King of Kings during these powerful days, made sense.

And that need for a theology of ultimate power, of fear and trembling, has its place for us too, no doubt. But kingship, royalty, in our time, and especially this year, I'd like to suggest, isn't going to be enough for all of us, and that's okay.

A king, as powerful as that image might be, is also, by definition, beyond our reach. Existing to assist us, to help us, but with blanket anonymity, surrounded by palace walls, chambers, and guards, with formality and decorum, with a lack of personalization and intimacy. The king is there, with grace and glory, but also with insurmountable distance and barriers between the king and us.

I think this year, we've known enough from distance, barriers, remoteness, from feeling alone or isolated.

So how are we supposed to pray when our hearts feel scatter and complicated? When our synagogue is in thousands of different homes? How do we find

togetherness, community, and support, those central pillars of who we are as a people, when we can't be physically together?

The mystics of the Zohar taught that the High Holidays are so meaningful, because, in their words, the King leaves the palace and meets us in the field where we are. But what if *dafka* this year we go even further? What if we allow ourselves some awe and wonder, some distant reverence, but then we keep going? Keep going to a closeness, an understanding of God that is beautifully immediate, near, and enveloping us in comfort, in understanding, in compassion, and in love?

What if we go beyond our liturgy and in between the letters, in between the beautiful notes and melodies, we bring in the God of the prophets, the God who spoke about us, God's people Israel, not as servants or subjects, but as a spouse, a partner, a beloved? The God who said to us through the prophet Isaiah, "*Kumi Ori, Ki Va Orech Uch'vod Adonai Alaiyich Zarach?* Arise! Shine! For your light has dawned, and God's goodness is all upon you. That even when darkness comes and envelops the earth, God's light will shine on you?" What if just as loudly as we sing *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father our King, we allow ourselves to sing *Yedid Nefesh, Av HaRachaman*, Beloved of my soul, partner in mercy?

And what if more than anything, we allow ourselves to feel worthy of that partnership, worthy of that love?

This isn't chutzpah, this is Jewish theology. I know it runs counter to our guilt and the self loathing we're portrayed as having in movies and TV shows, but it is central to our *emunah*, to our faith, that we are worth God's attention and we are worth the covenant to which we belong. That even though we make mistakes, even though we sometimes mess up our part of the partnership, that we are meant to be in this relationship, and that we can take comfort in it, that we can be vulnerable in it, and that when we're in need, we can ask for help, for strength, for support without fear of rejection.

That is the essence of chosenness. Not superiority, not exceptionalism... belonging.

There's a reason we Jews don't sing Amazing Grace. Not because we're arrogant. *L'havdil*. Quite the opposite. We're probably more prone than anyone else to nod in agreement with the line, "who saved a wretch like me." But our

insecurities, our self admonitions, our indebtedness isn't the entirety of our theology. It's where we begin, but it can't be where we end.

Because our relationship requires the depth and the profundity, the beauty, the intricacy, and the complexity of partnership. And when we go beyond the formal, the reverence, the distance, then we can enter into the miraculous, the sustaining, the magical.

But getting there means answering the question. It means that at all times, and in all moments, God is asking, how are you? And in turn, at all times, and in all moments, we have the opportunity to open our hearts and respond with honesty, safely, and with a feeling of being truly and sincerely heard.

So, *nu?* How are you?

If you're at all like a significant percentage of people in our country right now, you're probably a little lonely. Like me, you're probably missing coming together, being with community, hugging the people you are so used to seeing, your friends and family, your coworkers, and feeling that hug, that embrace in return.

If any of that is how you're feeling, then, one, you're in good company, and two, you're in a perfect place to join me, to join our clergy as this year, starting right now, we go further. We walk past the throne, out of the palace, and into our homes where God is waiting for us in whatever way we need.

To cry with us if we need to cry. To shout and get angry with us if we need to shout and be angry. To laugh with us if we need to laugh. But there with us to feel and to understand EVERY. LAST. Bit of it.

I've been wrestling a lot these last six months with the verse from the second creation story in *Bereshit*, "*Vayomer Adonai Elohim, Lo Tov Heyot Ha'Adam L'vado.*" God said, it's not good for Adam, for humankind to be alone."

On the *pshat* level, the most basic understanding of the text, our response should be, "well obviously." We know that this (gesture to the empty sanctuary) isn't good for us. The beating heart of Judaism is community, is our ability to come together, to support one another, to emphasize family, our immediate family and our ethno-religious family.

But I think in the spirit of going further, of digging a little bit deeper, we can look at this verse a different way. That this isn't simply the acknowledgement that God should divide Adam into two, into Adam and Chavah, but that it's also a fundamental and incredibly consequential decision in that moment that throughout the rest of time, humans will not be alone, because God will be their partner.

And maybe even to go a step further, that it's a moment of understanding for God that it's not good for God to be alone, either.

And so here we are, cosmically connected, committed to this relationship that can go where our loneliness can't. Not because it's bigger than us or more authoritative, not because it's kingly; but because it connects us all together transcending physical space. Beyond reverence and decorum. It connects us through the depths of our origins. It's quite literally in our bones, in the very essence of our creation and deeply embedded in the story of who we are.

We are together. Even when we're not. And the thread that binds us to one another is the One who created us to long for one another in the first place.

That goes far beyond kingship. And so should we.

So when we answer the question. As we feel whatever it is we're feeling this Rosh Hashanah, let's push ourselves to the places that aren't always easy to go. Because if we allow ourselves to get there, I promise we'll be rewarded, not just today, but continuously as we navigate this difficult time we're living in.

Physically distant, but spiritually and emotionally imminent, let's keep answering the question, and when it feels hard to do that, allow me to remind you that you belong here. That you're worth it. That during the last six months and beyond, you've been strong, and you've been courageous. You've stepped up for yourself, for your family, and for your community in ways that should make you so incredibly proud.

But when you're with God, when you're joining your prayers to all of ours around this city, this country, and this world, it's okay to come crashing down and to open up the places that hurt. That's what relationships are for. That's what partnership is all about. And it's what is going to sustain us as we walk this journey together.

May we travel far beyond the palace walls so that we can journey all the way back... to home. So we can sit with God with our hearts full and open. And let us start, as all things start in Judaism, with a question.

It's you and God. It's you and this family of ours. It's you and anyone and anything you need. It's all of it. But it's never you alone. It's time to ask. So let God ask:

How are you?

Now's a perfect opportunity for us to think about that question and the answer to it, because we're about to conclude with the sounding of the shofar. In his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides says that the blast of the shofar is a cosmic alarm clock, a wake up call we should feel deep in our bones shouting, awake you sleepers from your slumber! Seek good, seek peace, seek healing, and turn to your God with love.

Let's hear the alarm going off. Let's answer that call with our hearts overflowing. If you're watching with friends or family, I'll invite you to put your arms around one another, hold onto each other tight, and if you're wearing a tallit, feel free to cover your head and let the fabric surround you. Please rise for the sounding of the shofar.

*Rabbi Yonatan Dahlen
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