

Rabbi Fine
First Day Rosh Hashanah 5772

Waves on the Ocean of God:
Rediscovering our *Avodah*

As some of you may recall, I like to draw inspiration for sermons from the most refined wisdom of previous generations, from the worlds most profound sages, such as Marvin Gaye and Mel Brooks. Hoping to maintain my high standards, I'd like to begin by recalling one of the great insights of the 2000 year old man.

For those who aren't familiar with this great intellectual and artistic work of genius, the "2000 year old man" was played by Mel Brooks, who was interviewed by a character played by Carl Reiner.

In one interview, Reiner asks the 2000 year old man, "what was your means of transportation back then?"

The 2000 year old man replies, "uhh, mostly fear."

"Fear transported you?" asks the interviewer.

"Fear, yes, you see an animal would growl, you would go two miles in a minute."

This ancient truth brings us to the question I want to raise today. What is it that really moves us in our lives?

At your core, what motivates you?

What is your underlying orientation towards life that directs your choices, your commitments, your aspirations?

I believe that underneath the humor there is actually a lot of relevance in the 2000 year old man's answer to what moved him. As humans, we have the capacity to shape our lives around noble ideals.

At the same time, as vulnerable creatures, we have the capacity for anxiety and fear to play a primary role in shaping the direction of our lives.

The psychologist Abraham Maslow was famous for his hierarchy of needs, a 5 tiered pyramid, each layer of which consisted of a different level of human needs, from the most basic to the most refined.

The bottom level of the pyramid consisted of physiological needs, such as the necessity for water, air, food and sleep. On the next level up on the pyramid were safety and security, followed by social needs - our need to be loved, cared for, and in relationships with others.

The second highest level was “esteem needs”, the need for experiences that give us a positive sense of self. The uppermost level is what he calls self-actualization – the level at which our full potential as an individual comes to fruition in the world.

If the core force that moves us in life is at times that of the 2000 year old man - fear or anxiety- it is understandable. It is not always easy to fulfill our basic needs for sustenance, safety and security.

When meeting these needs becomes more challenging, as it has for so many people during this past year with increased unemployment and financial challenges, feelings of anxiety and fear increase as well. Likewise our esteem needs can be challenged during hard times as our identities are shaken by changes in our lives.

We can feel like the 2000 year old man running from the wild animal, with the direction of our lives being controlled by outside forces that we struggle to react to. We are wired psychologically and biologically to look out for ourselves, to protect ourselves and our loved ones, to first and foremost try to survive in this world.

But I believe we are also *spiritually* wired for a higher purpose. We are here not only to achieve security and safety in the world, but to live life with purposeful direction and deep meaning.

Maslow's hierarchy suggests that the most basic level of needs must be met before a person will strongly desire the higher level needs. On the one hand we can all recognize truth in this. If you don't have food to eat it is hard to focus energy on fulfilling your ultimate potential.

But later psychologists warned against approaching Maslow's hierarchy with rigidity, pointing out that even in the worst of times, living a life with a higher sense of meaning and purpose can help sustain us.

No one knew this better than the psychologist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. From his own experience in the concentration camps Frankl came to the conclusion that even in the most horrible dehumanizing situations, life has potential meaning, and that this sense of meaning can in fact can help us survive through such times.

The high holidays are our time to rediscover and realign ourselves with our most sacred sense of purpose; the primary orientation towards life that lends it meaning.

Our tradition offers an answer to the question of our purpose. Our most sacred and noble purpose is *avodat Hashem* – service of God.

To really understand what we it means to serve God though, we need to first explore some foundational questions.

Who or what is God? And who or what are we as human beings?

I chose a light topic today.

Our most basic Jewish assertion is that there is One God, or as I prefer to put it, that God is One. While we all are familiar with this idea, and might cite it if someone asked us what we Jews believe, we may not all actually understand or agree as to what it means.

Often times as Jews our conversations about God end after Hebrew school. We get a mix of messages in those early years:

...We are told that God is everywhere, and while that sounds really nice, if we ask in-depth questions about what that means, we don't always get real answers.

...We learn stories from the Torah, and meet an anthropomorphic God, who has the predominant feature of being male.

...We again encounter this God on the high holidays as a God who sits on high judging His creatures.

As Jews, we are generally a very intellectually engaged questioning bunch. But when it comes to God a strange thing seems to happen. We often accept that the God-concept we received when we were 7 is it.

For some people that conception of God works through adulthood. For others, it doesn't and they simply reject the idea of God altogether.

Some settle into an uncomfortable middle ground, accepting the notion of God at one level but living with cognitive dissonance because their God-concept doesn't fit with other parts of their worldview.

Others engage deeply and develop an adult God-concept that can be integrated with other aspects of their worldview. I am quite sure that each of these categories of people are sitting in this sanctuary right now.

The fact that our understandings of God don't always develop as we mature in other areas, is in part the fault of us rabbis and teachers who haven't always provided contexts for adults to engage seriously with our tradition.

In this light, I am going to be honest about my own God concept today, which is based in Kabbalah and the later Jewish mystical tradition. My hope is to open the gate for more of us to rediscover our *avodah*, our Divine service, this year.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov, the great spiritual master who lived about 200 years ago, told a story about a king who one day is given the news that all the crops of his kingdom would soon be affected by a terrible blight.

The King finds out that anyone who eats the affected grain crop will go mad. Upon learning this, the he calls in his trusted adviser and asks him what to do.

‘Of course,’ the king says, ‘there is enough grain left from last year’s harvest so that you and I could continue eating of it. We would remain sane and keep all the others from doing any harm.’ ‘

‘Your majesty,’ replies the wise man, ‘if only you and I are sane and all the rest are madmen, who is it that will be locked up in the asylum?’

‘I understand,’ said the king, ‘but what is left for us to do?’

‘You and I will eat the same grain as everyone else,’ replies the wise man, ‘ but right now I will place a mark on your forehead, and you place one on mine, so that whenever we look at each other we will be reminded of our madness. And that will be enough.’

In this story, Rebbe Nachman was describing human existence as he knew it: we have all eaten the grain so to speak, and live with a core illusion.

Take a moment and look around.

Why are we here?

Hundreds of us have gathered here today. We *know* there is something about the essence of our lives that we are supposed to remember here on Yom haZikaron, the day of remembrance.

We are meant to be like the king and the adviser, realizing upon seeing each other that there is something very deep we have forgotten.

What is this core illusion we live with, and the true reality we are meant to remember?

When I was 18, the summer after high school, I went through a period of intense religious experience.

While I refer to this as religious experience, it didn’t take place within the framework of organized religion. One of the triggers for this experience was an Imax movie called Cosmic Voyage. It takes us on a journey outward through our solar system, past the closest star that would take 100,000 years to get to in modern day spacecraft, out of our galaxy of billions of

swirling stars, out beyond the cluster of galaxies the milky way belongs to, out beyond super clusters of galaxies of unfathomable size, to the edge of the known universe.

It then zooms the other direction, into a drop of water, into a molecule of the water, into an atom within the molecule, into the nucleus within the atom, and down to the infinitesimally small quarks within the nucleus.

As I looked at the stars throughout that summer, I was overwhelmed by how small my existence was in the vast expanse of the universe. At the same time, I was overwhelmed by how *significant* my existence was, how incredible it was to be a part of our universe that was alive with human consciousness.

I'm sure many of us have had experiences of awe that put us in the face of the great mystery of life and give us a radically different lens on the world.

Perhaps it has come as an experience of awe in nature, or through an encounter with the cycle of life as a child is born or a loved one passes on, or during a moment in which the heart opens up during prayer.

As is often the case, my intense feelings of wonder didn't stay with me permanently, but they did shift my life path. The core realization I had during these experiences was that I am a part of the Universe, not separate from it. It was this insight that began my religious life and continues to sustain it.

At one level this insight is totally obvious. *Of course* we humans are part of the world around us. But at a fundamental level we seem to forget this truth, and instead live with the illusion that each of us is truly separate from everything else in the world.

Our sense of an individual identity grows out of our basic need to take care of our self and those we love, and it is what allows us to function in the world.

But we have a tendency overbelieve in the separateness of our individual selves from the universe in which we live.

What we are here to remember is that we are part of something much greater than the small self we spend so much of our time narrowly concerned with.

The self, the "I," is perhaps the most subtle of idols that we worship. But as Jews, we are meant to shape our lives around a deeper motivating force than personal self-interest.

We are meant to shape our lives around a different conviction:

Shema Yisrael Ado-nai Elo-heynu, Ado-nai Echad
Hear O Israel, God is One.

All is One. Truly One. This is the core understanding of Jewish mysticism and all mystical traditions in the world.

There is a poignant metaphor used to express the conundrum of our existence that shows up in a variety of teachings, including in the book "Tuesdays with Morrie."

There once was a little wave, bobbing along in the ocean, having a grand old time. He's enjoying the wind and the fresh air-until he notices the other waves in front of him, crashing against the shore.

"My God, this is terrible," the wave says. "Look what's going to happen to me!"

Then along comes another wave. It sees the first wave, looking grim, and it says to him, "Why do you look so sad?"

The first wave says, "You don't understand! We're all going to crash! All of us waves are going to be nothing! Isn't it terrible?"

The second wave says, "No, you don't understand. You're not a wave, you're part of the ocean."

We should not wait to remember that until right before we crash on the shore at the end of our lives. We are meant to strive to remember it on a daily basis, and especially on the high holidays.

In Kabbalah, we have terms that describe the two different viewpoints we find in the story of the waves.

The first is called *mochin d'katnut* – small consciousness. This is the perspective of the first wave in our story that is worried about the shoreline.

The second state is called *mochin d'gadlut* – expansive consciousness. This is the perspective of the second wave, which sees itself as part of the ocean.

We may only enter a state of *mochin d'gadlut* - expansive consciousness - in rare or brief moments in our life. It is indeed quite different to think the world is One and to experientially see the world from this perspective, which is the aspiration of the mystic.

But even from the vantage point of everyday small consciousness, we can understand that it is not simply a metaphor to say that all is One.

Show me something that is separate from the whole to which we belong. Our bodies are made up of stardust, the basic elements created by giant stars that exploded billions of years ago.

All hydrogen atoms, an essential element in the H₂O that makes up much of our bodies, is even older - more than 13 billion years old.

Those atoms recycled millions of times before the word recycling came into existence.

According to one calculation, within any glass of water, at least of several of the hydrogen atoms would once have been inside a dinosaur.

When we fast on Yom Kippur our fatigue and hunger reminds us that we are entirely dependent on other life forms - plants and animals - to exist.

Just as a carrot mysteriously stops being a carrot and becomes part of you when you eat it, so too we all will one day go the way of all living things and become part of the earth.

Ultimately, we are not separate from the material universe we live in except in our minds.

So *why do we* so naturally think of ourselves as waves instead of parts of the ocean? How did we get in this strange situation?

Jewish mysticism has a story of how the world was created that provides an answer to these questions.

Once upon a time, or actually it was before time began, all was One. All was God. The essence of God is goodness, and so God desired to give, to share. Since all was God, the only thing God had to share was Godself.

But it was also true that there was no one to share God's self with. In order to solve this paradox, the Divine contracted Itself, pulling back to make a space where there was an absence of God.

That space can be compared to an empty glass, waiting to be filled. God then poured some of God's light, some of God's goodness, into that empty place.

But the container wasn't strong enough to hold God's light, and the vessel shattered into infinite pieces, each piece trapping within it a bit of God's light. This primordial cataclysm was how our world was created according to Kabbalah.

Each of us and everything in this world is one of those shards, a mixture of the broken vessel and the Divine light.

If you are thinking to yourself - rabbi, this is pretty out there wacko mystical stuff, I think I'll stick with the 7 days of creation and the Garden of Eden - well I want to share one more story of creation with you.

Once upon a time, or actually it was before time began, all was One. Everything in the entire Universe was unified in what is referred to as a singularity. This singularity that contained all matter in the entire universe was by some estimations the size of a small ball, others say the size of a pin prick.

There was nothing outside of it. There was no place other than it. And then about 14 billion years ago, it exploded and expanded with unfathomable power.

This, our modern scientists tell us, was the beginning of our universe, which continues to expand to this day. All of us, every person, every leaf, every tree, every star, every i-Pad, everything – has the same origin.

Over billions of years stars developed, including our sun, as well as planets. Eventually here on our little planet earth, life emerged in single celled creatures.

Over the past 2 billion years or so, life evolved and there came to be myriad life forms, including very recently, us humans. In the process of this evolution, something remarkable took place. We developed self-awareness and language, able to consider how we got here and how to live our lives.

And so here we are.

Whether it is the Kabbalistic tale of origins, or the modern cosmological tale, we have a story of the Great One, that somehow became many, but which truly remains one, underneath it all.

And we have us humans, a part of that one, with the ability to realize that we are part of that great whole.

You may wonder, does it really matter how we think about our place in the universe?

I believe it is in fact *incredibly* important, because our actions flow out of our worldview.

The conviction that we are not part of a greater whole is part of what allows us to do all of those terrible things for which we strike our chests in the vidui, the confessional.

“We have stolen. We have committed acts of violence. We have gossiped. We have been dishonest in business.....”

What we are really saying is – “*I have acted as if I am the center of the universe, when in truth the universe is the center of me.*”

Woody Allen once described the difference between a comedy and a tragedy saying, “If you fall down an open manhole, it's a comedy. If I stub my toe, it's a tragedy.”

While Woody Allen pushes this joke about our human proclivity to be self-centered to a ridiculous extreme, what is true is that at times we all relate to our family, our friends, the natural world, and even to God from a self-centered vantage point.

When we put our self at the center of existence, we act accordingly. We approach the world with the basic question – what do you have for me?

But when we approach life with awe and wonder, realizing that even our consciousness itself is just a manifestation of the Universe, a manifestation of God, we will naturally move from the question of what can I take, to what can I give?

Or to spiritualize the words of JFK, as we enter prayer we must ask not what God can do for us, but what we can do for God.

I can imagine that this theological perspective might be unnerving to some of us. Didn't we learn in Hebrew school that God is all powerful? Surely God doesn't need *our* help?

And if all is One and our purpose is to ask what we can do for that One, does this mean we are supposed to give up our individuality?

Does it mean that we should give up a life that is self-fulfilling for one that is totally about self-sacrifice?

The fundamental question is the one we began with -- What is *avodat Hashem*?

If our purpose according to Jewish tradition is to serve God, what does this mean from the perspective of radical Oneness that I have articulated.

The Kabbalists tell us, that our purpose in this world that is One but looks like many, is no less than to reunite the Divine.

Our purpose is to search for the sparks of holiness that are hidden in the world and to reveal their presence.

To lift up these sparks is to respond to what is broken and make it whole again, whether it be in our emotional life, our interpersonal life, our communal life, or our life as a citizen of the world. In the days ahead, I will speak about each of these areas in more depth.

Our job is to unify; to act in ways that will make the underlying Oneness of all of life manifest. **This is our purpose.** This what it means to serve *HaKadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy Blessed One.

While this Cosmic purpose can sound abstract, it's fulfillment is found in the details of our everyday lives.

In the words of the chief rabbi of England, Jonathan Sacks:

“The interesting part of the moral life, the grown-up part, comes not in universals but particulars. It speaks to me, here, now: this person, in this situation, at this time. It says: there is an act only you can do, a situation only you can address, a moment that, if not seized, may never come again.... That is why we are here. The sum of these tasks is the meaning of our life, the purpose of our existence, the story we are called upon to write.”

A life of service entails asking ourselves in each moment, how can I best respond to the situation in front of me?

The shift from asking what life can do for me, to what can I do for life, doesn't happen all at once. It happens when we ask ourselves this question over and over again within the specific contexts of our lives, and then allow the awareness it creates in us to guide our actions.

Each time we make this shift, we bring ourselves step by step more deeply into service of the One to whom we belong.

It is true that there is an element of humility involved in dedicating your life to something greater than yourself. We sing to God here on the high holidays, “*v'yitnu l'cha keter mlucha*” – we will give to you a crown of Kingship.

We declare that God is King, not us. We declare that the Ocean is immortal, but not the wave.

Facing our mortality and remembering we are part of a much larger story is meant to humble us on Rosh Hashanah. But this is not meant to diminish us, it is meant to deepen us.

It is not meant to lead us to feelings of the vanity of existence, but rather the great significance of existence. Confronting the existential mystery of life is not meant to make us feel bad about our often mundane existence, but to prompt us to question how we can more fully live up to the utter profundity of our existence.

A life of service doesn't mean giving up our individuality or personal fulfillment.

Just the opposite.

A life of service calls forth our utmost potential as a unique individual.

It requires you to use your skills, creativity, power, passions, opportunities, and resources to make the world more whole in ways only you can.

When the core motivating force in our life is fear, like the two thousand year old man, we will run away from things, reacting to what life throws at us.

But when we realign our core motivation to be one of service, we won't *react*, we will *respond*, running towards the opportunity in each moment.

In the words of Viktor Frankel, “The religious person differs from the apparently irreligious person only by experiencing his existence not simply as a task, but as a mission. This means that he is also aware of the taskmaster, the source of his mission. For thousands of years that source has been called God.”

I would change Frankel's language, however, which refers to the source of our mission a taskmaster. Our master doesn't give us a task, but a gift.

How unfathomably awesome, in the true sense of the word, to be a participant in this great mystery we call life.

The Kabbalistic framework asserts that *yes*, God does need us. The world is waiting to be redeemed, healed and uplifted, and for that, God needs our help.

What an inconceivable honor and joy to be in the service of *haKadosh Baruch Hu*, the Holy Blessed One.

Several studies have shown that the best predictor of happiness and health is having a sense of purpose and meaning in life. In the words of Rabbi Sacks:

“Happiness is the ability to say: I lived for certain values and acted on them...To know that you made a difference, that in this all-too-brief span of years you lifted someone’s spirits, relieved someone’s poverty or loneliness, or brought a moment of grace or justice to the world that would not have happened had it not been for you: these are as close as we get to the meaningfulness of a life, and they are matters of everyday, rather than heroic virtue.”

May we all find meaning and great joy this year in fulfilling the deep purpose we have been blessed with.