

## EREV ROSH HASHANAH 5777 – AVINU MALKAYNU – IDEAS ABOUT GOD

*Avinu malkaynu...* Father – the one who loves us and dotes on us. King – the one who establishes the rules and demands adherence.

*Avinu malkaynu* – Our nurturer and setter of boundaries.

*Chonaynu va'anaynu* – Be gracious to us and answer us – It is no easy task for us to perceive Your presence, I mean really feel and believe that You, God, are real and near.

*Ki ayn banu ma'asim* – For we have few worthy deeds – We are not necessarily disciplined in our ritual practice. We are busy – work, play, commitments, health, finances, the running of households and organizations.

*Aseh imanu tzedakah vachessed vehoshi'aynu* – Be kind to us, and compassionate, and save us from illness and gratuitous violence – We don't understand You at all, we don't put a whole lot of effort into getting to know You, and yet we still hope You exist and have our best interests at heart.

A young, Chasidic rabbi traveled to see his Rebbe – the famous Seer of Lublin. He knew it was time to leave his full-time studies and go out to serve a Jewish community. He was looking for a sure-fire method for reaching God so the local community would quickly accept and respect him and want to learn further from him.

A single, certain method? asked the Seer of Lublin. What makes you think there is one way that will work for everyone? Impossible! For one, the way is study. For another it is prayer and meditation. For yet another, it is fasting and feasting in the proper season. Not to mention the one for whom it is serving his neighbor.

We all hunger for a system that will lead us to the truth. Even if we choose not to follow *the* path to God, it is comforting to know that one exists. And ultimately that's what we want, a comfortable answer to our questions. A God that is attainable, knowable, safe and controllable.

Yet, when Moshe Rabbaynu, Moses, asks God for a name he can share with the Israelites, God's answer is the opposite of attainable, knowable, safe and controllable. *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*. I was whatever I was. I am whatever I am. I will be whatever I will be.

The Seer of Lublin answered the young rabbi's inquiry with this instruction: Carefully observe your own heart, see what stirs your passion for God and godliness, and then do that with all your heart and all your strength.

*Ehyeh asher ehyeh* – I am whatever I am.

There is no path to God because God is right here, and right there, and everywhere in between. There is no method for achieving God because God is already yours and mine and his and hers.

The Zen Buddhist tradition has an idiom: looking for an ox while riding on the ox. We already have the thing for which we are looking. We don't need to find God, or understand God. What we need is to recognize God or godliness already and inextricably present in our life experience.

Carefully observe your own heart, see what stirs your passion for God and godliness, and then do that with all your heart and all your strength.

Life itself bears within it moments so rare and powerful that they call upon us to transform the rest of our experience in their wake. These moments can come without warning, though they may be evoked by great beauty, by joy, by terror, or by anything else that causes us to stop and interrupt our ordinary all-encompassing and yet essentially superficial perception of reality. Arthur Green, **RADICAL JUDAISM**

When that mask of ordinariness falls away, we are left with a moment of nakedness, an encounter with a reality that we do not know how to put into language. The great rabbi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, called such moments radical amazement.

The Chasidim teach that God is to be sought and found everywhere and in each moment. God-seeking is both a daily practice and a lifelong adventure. An ongoing discovery of God uplifts and transforms both the soul and the world.

Searching for Avinu Malkaynu. Searching for the Father – the one who loves us and dotes on us. Searching for the King – the one who establishes the rules and demands adherence.

**Avinu:**

Where and when do we feel love, unconditionally abounding love? Love that generates security and confidence, solidity and calm, awe and amazement? Mama love? Papa love? The embrace of lovers? A sunset? A rainbow? The lightness and warmth of floating the river on a hot, sunny day? Effortless schussing, gliding to and fro and ultimately down a snow blanketed mountain? Nestled beneath the shelter of our Ponderosa pine forests? Playing with a new puppy? Welcoming a new baby into the world? Tangible, palpable love moments?

**Malkaynu:**

Where and when do we experience reassurance and relief rooted in the rules and laws of nature and physics? Waking to a new day? The autumnal turning of leaves and conversely the emergence of green grasses and pink flower buds in the spring? In the fact that scratches and scrapes heal and the scars they leave behind fade? The proven reliability of a parent or partner in life? That medicine works? That turbulent, difficult times pass and moments of ease and comfort come again?

Carefully observe your own heart, see what stirs your passion for God and godliness, and then do that with all your heart and all your strength.

Formal doctrines of theism describe an external God who creates and acts upon the creation at will. I am not a Theist. Nor am I an atheist.

I seek God and find godly moments all day long and throughout the course of my life. In the cool, crisp air that invigorates my morning run through meadow and forest. As the day takes hold and the sun warms me. In the warm and comfortable support of my memory foam bed at night when I'm ready to sleep. When I look at my family and am filled with love and admiration following temporary bouts of teen turbulence or marital misunderstanding. And most recently, in the outrageous demonstrations of love and support of this particular community and friends I've collected over the years following the deaths of my mother and grandmother and now as I face treatment for breast cancer. You feed my belly with meal trains and my soul with kind words, compassionate embraces and countenances, patience and continued expectations.

Recently I adopted the language of one of my teachers, Rabbi Arthur Green from Boston Hebrew College, who calls himself a nontheist. A nontheist rejects not God but the narrow confines of outdated God-talk, that is, theism. With all my heart and strength, I reject the notion that God is external to our experience and acts with will for or against this person or that nation or a particular football team. God is utterly and completely enmeshed in this universe, other universes, and my life experience.

Nietzsche liberated adherents of Enlightenment ideals, from childish notions of an authoritarian God who chose when and where suffering and joy would reside when he declared: God is dead. But rejecting the idea of a puppeteer-God operating from an invisible throne in the heavens did not comfort us.

Kafka poignantly described the void we felt: a joyless world from which God was absent and there was no air left to breathe, no room left to live, to love, or to create. The emptiness of an existence without purpose or direction was too heavy for his characters to bear.

And then, Camus presented us with a noble call: we can create our own meaning. We possess a capacity to defy meaninglessness with creativity and reasoned responses to injustice and unfairness, i.e., moral action.

Whether or not we've read and studied the works of these intellectual masters and others like them, their ideas are deeply engrained in our understanding of how the world works and our role in it. Ultimately we see ourselves, human beings as the prime movers on the planet we call home.

That being said, we are not alone in our decision making. We are blessed with treasure troves of inherited wisdom from the experience of the myriad generations of humans who preceded us. We learn from our parents and grandparents, from teachers, mentors, and role models. We learn from books, the earliest ones written by religious and philosophical geniuses.

Our sacred literature, as Jews, records discourse among our intellectual seekers about the universal experiences we are still trying to figure out. The how's and why's of everything. Where we came from. How we should behave toward one another. Stewardship of the earth's resources. Why do good people suffer and naughty people prosper? Purpose and meaning...

Rabbi Arthur Green writes in my favorite of his books, **RADICAL JUDAISM**: Humanism means an understanding that our fate, along with that of the entire planet depends on human action. There is no one to hold back our hand, to keep us from destroying this garden in which we have been placed. We are totally responsible.

**AND**

Religious humanism means that we will fulfill that awesome role only by realizing that we are part of a reality infinitely more ancient, more profound, and more unified than any of us can express or know.

Even if finding God is a highly personal and non-doctrinal experience, religion has a purpose that is timely and essential to our success as a species. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Janism, Zoroastrianism, and religions we never even heard of, as different as they are from one another, all share universal truths and pursuits. Ultimately we are all connected and we are all reliant on one another as well as the biological success of our planet for survival.

It's all about how we approach religion that makes the difference. The suggestion that one must choose between religion and science or rationalism is a farce. Evolution and climate change are not beliefs – they are scientific theories. And scientific theories are not simply theories. Laws of nature are proven over and over again. Beliefs and facts are not interchangeable.

Religious fundamentalism is a blatant misuse of religion. It pits religious traditions against one another, requiring that one is right and the rest are wrong. Fundamentalism is about controlling people. Adherence for the sake of adherence doesn't generate meaning and purpose nor does it bring people closer to God. Fundamentalism is, at best, an archaic way of thinking and behaving, and at worst, a conscious effort to stop the natural growth and development of our species.

Religious traditions help us mark time so that it doesn't pass too quickly and without learning lessons from our experiences. Religious traditions inspire us to explore good and evil, right and wrong, nurturing our decision making. Religious traditions give us shared language and rituals, enabling us to build intimacy and community with one another.

The rabbis of the Talmud asserted that God no longer has a role in determining Jewish Law. God gave us the Torah. It's ours. We decide how to use it.

We begin with ourselves.

*Carefully observe your own heart, see what stirs your passion for God and godliness, and then do that with all your heart and all your strength.*

Pray. Sing. Jam on a keyboard, guitar, or drums... Hike. Bike. Run. Paddleboard. Kayak. Ski. Skate. Serve loved ones and neighbors. Serve the stranger, and thereby humanity. Garden. Hug a tree. Sit and enjoy the quiet. Sit and quiet the mind.

We live and thrive with others.

*We are part of a reality infinitely more ancient, more profound, and more unified than any of us can express or know.*

Pay attention to one another. Treasure your partner in life. Nurture self-reliance and confidence in your children. *Love your neighbor as yourself.* Play together. Pray together. Sing together. Accompany one another amidst both the joys and travails life presents. Celebrate seasons and milestones. Witness pain and suffering, loss and doubt.

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*Avinu malkaynu* – Our nurturer and setter of boundaries.

*Chonaynu va'anaynu* – Be gracious to us and answer us – It is no easy task for us to perceive Your presence, with reminders and practice we seek the profound moments in daily life and personal growth.

*Ki ayn banu ma'asim* – For we have few worthy deeds – We are not necessarily disciplined in our ritual practice. We are busy – work, play, commitments, health, finances, the running of households and organizations.

*Aseh imanu tzedakah vachessed vehoshi'aynu* – Be kind to us, and compassionate, and save us from illness and gratuitous violence – We may not ever fully grasp You, and yet we still hope You exist and have our best interests at heart. We are here, now, turned toward the New Year with open hearts and open minds, prepared to learn new skills, better practice old ones, and embrace the beauty and profundity of life ever-unfolding before our eyes.

**Avinu Malkaynu**