

The ultimate experience not only of God but also of our lives is wonder and awe, experiencing something that we can't understand, that we can't make happen at will. For example, a gorgeous sun set; a day when we are in synch with everything in our lives; a moment of real love and connection between two people. That feeling of awe and wonder feeds us in a way that nothing else does. We are inspired to create and to support others in their creations. It inspires us to do our very best.

The purpose of any prayer service is to create that kind of awe and wonder; that kind of inspiration. But we know that so often that does not happen. Rabbi Elliot Dorff compares prayer to baseball. He reminds us that a great batting average is .300. If a ball player can get a hit three times out of every ten at bats, he or she is considered a really good player. He tells us that we cannot expect to get a hit every time we pray but that the more we practice, the better we will get at it.

And so in the next ten days, we will have a lot of practice praying; we will spend a lot of time trying to feel that awe that is so important to our ability to change and grow. We will spend the next ten days talking to God and asking Him to help us identify our transgressions and vow to live a holier life.

I am always trying to find ways to talk about God that will help us feel a connection to Him. One of our teens described God like this:

'This concept of God, especially that of infinite existence, would keep me up many a night. This scared me much more than it confused me, but one night something finally clicked. My relationship with God should not be one in which I lived in fear, but rather one in which I lived alongside God.'

This understanding really impressed me. It was so simple and one that we could all relate to and live with. No matter how we envision or experience God, it will be easier if we experience Him alongside of us.

To inspire us in our prayers and in our connection to God, I've gathered quotes from various Jewish sources. I will read several of them tonight. And I have copies of them and others for you to take with you to use quotes as inspiration throughout the High Holidays.

From the *Torah*:

And now, Israel, what does *Adonai*, your God require of you, but to fear *Adonai*, your God, to walk in all his ways, and to love him, and to serve *Adonai*, your God with all your heart and with all your soul, To keep the commandments of *Adonai*, and his statutes, which I command you this day for your good. [*Devarim*, Deuteronomy, 10:12, 13]

Rebbe Akiva (first and second centuries C.E. Jerusalem) said:

You shall love your neighbor as yourself. *Rebbe Akiva* says: this is the greatest principle of Torah. [*Midrash Sifra* 89b]

Moving into the 20th century, Henrietta Szold said in a talk to the *Yishuv* in Jerusalem in 1942.

Men who express views at variance with those of a presumed majority are exposed to bodily harm. Political scores are settled with bombs. Liberty of conscience and freedom of speech threaten to slip away from our guardianship. Our hallowed ethical standards are in danger of declining. These are evil things of which our camp must be cleansed...The Jew and his cause have persisted through the ages not by might of the fist, not by brute force, but by the spirit of divine law and love.

Rabbi Leo Baeck, in England said in a *Yom Yippur* prayer in 1935:

With the same fervor with which we confess our sins, the sins of the individual and the sins of the community, do we...express our contempt for the lies concerning us...? We have trust in our faith and its future. Who taught the world respect for man, created in the image of God? Who spoke of the Commandments of righteousness, of social justice? It grew out of our Judaism and it is still growing. By these facts we repel the insults flung at us.

David Ben Gurion, the first Prime Minister of Israel to the Peel Commission in 1936:

The Jewish redemption is here and it is now. We are very privileged to live at a time when we are not forced to survive culturally on mysticism and dreams. It is not next year in Jerusalem but today. And I am sure that as we are home again, we shall once more be creative as a people. We have already begun to be so.

And last Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, 20th century Germany and US who walked with Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1965:

'For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. I felt like my legs were praying.'

It is so important for all of us to follow the example of Rabbi Heschel, to pray both with our mouths and with our legs. At this time of year, we look back over the last year and make the commitment to take our Judaism more seriously. To practice more commandments. To give more *tzedakah*. To learn more about what is required of us. So that in a year we can stand here feeling even more solid in our faith and in our practice.

Keyn Heyi Ratzon, May it be so.

Shana Tova u'mitukah, May we all have a good and sweet year.