

Rosh Hashanah Morning – September 17, 2012

This morning I'd like to spend a few minutes talking about a subject that many people don't like talking about. We have several such topics that fall into that "no talk" zone – sex, money, and politics. The one I want to bring up is another of those "no talk" zone topics—religion and more specifically the G word – God.

There may be some among us who are very comfortable talking about God and there may be others who don't want to talk about it at all – or who consider it a private thing, between me and my God. Some of us may be afraid to even think about the idea of talking about God. Some of us may not believe in God, so there's not much to talk about.

It seems to me that perhaps one of the reasons we don't want to talk about God, no matter what our understanding and feeling is about God, is that we haven't been socialized to do so. It's not an everyday conversation topic. It probably wasn't a subject talked about at the dinner table. Even though I went through many years of religious school and was confirmed, I don't remember talking about God. It was as if it was a given. God just was.

And yet, we talk about and to God all the time, especially in worship services. Our liturgy is all about God. Through it we thank, we praise, we acknowledge, we ask.

Here we are on these High Holy Days, where we ask God to forgive us for those times in our lives over the past year where we've missed the mark. We hope that we are able to turn in a new direction. We say that we want to turn in a direction that is more God-like. We say we want to turn more towards God. We say we want to walk in God's way. We say we want to do what God requires of us. And what is it that God requires – the prophet Micah says it simply – to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

When we recite the prayers where we thank, and praise, and acknowledge, and ask, do we have a sense of the God being addressed? I'm sure some of us do and some of us don't, and some of us haven't even thought about it.

For a long time, I was one of those who didn't think about it. It wasn't until I was in my mid 30's that I started paying attention and noticing. Up until then, even though I was very Jewish – living a strongly identified Jewish life – observing Shabbat and festivals, participating in rituals and mitzvot, leading worship, studying and teaching, creating new liturgy, I didn't really think about God and I certainly didn't have a relationship at least that I knew about.

I was jolted into beginning to think about God one evening some 29 years ago. I know the timeframe, because it was when Fran and I were dating. It was a beautiful evening in Washington DC and Fran and I had gone down to the Jefferson memorial and were sitting at the edge of the reflecting pool. We were having a wonderful conversation about life and dreams and the future when she asked me about my belief in and understanding of God. I said – well, to be honest I don't know, I haven't thought much about it, I guess I'm not sure I even believe in God. And she turned to me and asked me how it was that I could get up in front of a congregation and lead worship services and how was it possible for me to be on the liturgy committee writing and compiling prayers and creating a prayer book if I didn't believe in God? It's a good thing it wasn't a litmus test kind of question. Things might not be the same today. Yet her question did start me thinking and was the beginning of the journey as a seeker.

Today I'm in a very different place. God is very much a part of my life. I'm able to answer the questions of who and what is God for me. I know where to find God. I am aware when I close up and keep God out and I'm very aware of when I let God in. The journey hasn't always been easy. It has involved a lot of introspection and self-awareness and mindfulness and being brutally honest with myself. And the journey continues. And what's the reward been for all the hard work and the pain of facing myself head on – inner peace, calm, letting go of some

of the traits that kept me bound up, being able to respond in a more balanced way to things that happen, knowing when I screw up, knowing when I don't always make the marks I'd like to meet, being better able to forgive, better able to say I'm sorry, better able to love, and knowing I am never alone.

My journey opened and my understanding expanded because a question was asked and a conversation started. The questions and conversations continue. They don't stop because a certain point has been reached. There's always more to learn.

This past summer I had an occasion to have a conversation with one of my teachers about this very subject. I told her my story and then I asked her about her story. When she told me that she played with God as a child. I was so taken aback by that comment that I didn't know what to say and just nodded. I wish I would have asked her what that meant. The opportunity to continue the conversation didn't occur, so I started to think about what it might be like to play with God. I imagined having a tea party where I was sitting with my "imaginary friend" at a table and I said out loud – would you like some tea? Great, let me pour you some. How many times have we seen children playing in all kinds of ways with their pretend friend? Is it pretend? Is it children's innocence and imagination that enables them to see and understand things that we adults with all our experiences of life can't? Maybe these unencumbered children know something we don't.

What would it be like if we could sit with another person and tell the other our God story? What if we could ask each other –

What is your God story?

Is God in your life?

If not, why not?

Who is God for you?

What is God for you?

What do you call God?

Do you ever have God moments – like you know God is there?

Where do you find God?

Do you ever talk to God?

What do you talk about?

Maybe we're not ready to sit with a friend and have a conversation. Maybe we first need to explore these questions with ourselves. Or maybe we don't even know where to start. Perhaps a spiritual companion might be helpful – people trained in walking with us on our journey. There are several such folks in our area.

There is a phrase in the Talmud, from the tractate on blessings, Maseket Brachot – a phrase that is found in many synagogues – Da lifnei mi atah omed – Know before whom you stand. On Yom Kippur we stand and ask God to forgive –

us for missing marks, for not walking in God's ways. Do we know that God before whom we are standing?

As we go into these days of deep introspection before Yom Kippur, let us do the work that is asked of us to search our inner most selves and find and acknowledge where we've gone off the path and have not walked justly and mercifully and humbly. And let us take some of that introspective time to ask ourselves questions that may help us get to a place of knowing before whom it is we will be standing when we are back here next week.

13th Century Sufi poet Rumi wrote a poem titled I Was You.

By day I praised You, and never knew it.

By night I stayed with You and never knew it.

I always thought that I was me – but no

I was You and never knew it.

Rabbi Margot Stein wrote lyrics and music to a Talmudic passage that talks about 70 faces of God – 70 faces because there is no one way to see, know, understand, and relate to God. It's in the supplement on pg 5.

When I look into your eyes I see, 70 faces of God

When I look into your eyes I see, shivim panei Elohim.

Turn, turn – everything's around you.

Turn, turn – everything's within you.

May God bless us and keep us

May God's face shine upon us and be gracious to us.

May God be present with us and give us peace.

Kein y'hi ratzon. So may it be.