

Name That Shul: Beth-El
Yom Kippur Morning
October 12, 2016 ☆ 10 Tishri 5777
Rabbi Shelley Goldman

When I called my brother to tell him that I had accepted a position as assistant rabbi in Indianapolis I said, “The congregation is called Beth-El Zedeck, or The House of God and Justice!” And his response? “That sounds about right!” Because, you see, working for social justice causes has been at the heart of my Jewish commitments since I was young. How perfect is it that after my 6 year journey in rabbinical school, where I was able to examine my relationship with God, I would end up serving a congregation that calls itself by both names “Beth-El,” “The House of God” and “Zedeck,” “Justice.” In my talk on the Second Day of Rosh HaShanah I delved into the various meanings and expressions of “Zedeck” and this morning I would like to reflect and converse with you about God.

When I was learning in Jerusalem in my 5th year of rabbinical school we had a Modern Orthodox speaker present to our cohort of Reconstructionist rabbinical students. Rabbi Aryeh Ben David said, “What is the one subject that almost no one in the Jewish world talks about?” He went on to say, “We do a great job talking about current events and justice, we can debate for hours about Israel and the best way to make peace in the Middle East, many of us spend a lot of time talking about Torah and thinking about what all the stories in our sacred cannon mean, but how many of us have truly had a deep conversation in the last year with one of our closest friends about God?! We don’t do it!” Rabbi Aryeh Ben David is an inspiring educator working with students from across the Jewish world (Reform, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reconstructionist – just to name the “Big Four” movements in the USA in the order of when they came into existence.) And his goal is for us to approach Jewish teaching and learning not only as an intellectual exercise of the mind but to endeavor to transform our hearts, souls, and the work of our hands in the world as well. And how do we do that? Well, one way is to seriously consider the way that God functions in our lives. Now, I know that “God talk” is not unusual in this congregation and that is a testament to Rabbi Dennis and Rabbi Sandy’s leadership. And just as our ancestor Jacob named the place that he encountered God “Beit-El”¹ so too would I like to share with you my musings on God in this Beth-El in Indianapolis. But first, let’s start with you.

- What does the word God mean to you?
- How has God shown up in your life?
- Have you ever felt a presence outside of and beyond yourself? When? Where?
- What spiritual type are you?
- Do you feel most connected to other people and something greater than yourself when you are studying or having a deep intellectual conversation?
- Are you an emotional spiritual type who finds God in nature, while listening to music, or when something touches your heart?
- Are you a mystic or seeker who longs for oneness with The Divine through meditation or chanting or yoga?

¹ Genesis 28:19

- Are you committed to social justice and feel the best when you are at a protest, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, serving food to needy families on Christmas Day, wrapping presents with Federation's "Adopt a Family" or other work that serves those in need and helps to make the world a better place?
- Do you think all this talk of God is relevant or beside the point?

Let's begin at the intellectual level and go from there.

Congregation Beth-El was founded primarily by Russian Jewish immigrants to Indianapolis in 1915. As many of you know, Beth-El merged with the Hungarian Congregation Ohev Zedeck in 1927 to form Beth-El Zedeck. Beth-El is a familiar name for a congregation and there are congregations named Beth-El all across the United States. It is a simple and powerful name for a congregation as it employs one of the most popular names of God in the Jewish tradition: El. The word El, which is simply translated as God, often accompanies the name Adonai. Adonai, which is often translated as "My Lord," is the common reading for the Hebrew letters *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey*. Tradition does not permit us to say out loud our special name of God, *YHVH*, and so we say *Adonai* instead. There is much discussion over what our special name for God might actually mean. It is suggested that *YHVH* comes from the verb "To Be" or "To Become." This understanding of the meaning of God's name as "to be present" or "to be with" is a simple yet powerful statement about the human condition. While we have important concepts within Jewish tradition regarding changing the world to make it a better place, a more just place, a place with more Zedeck/ Justice there is at the same time something to be said for acceptance of what is.

YHVH can also be understood as "God Was – God Is – God Will Be" which is a fun grammatical exercise conjugating the verb "To Be." It is also a profound theological statement. God Was (here before us) – God Is (here now) – and God Will Be (in the future, even after we're gone.) The prophet channeling God's words in Isaiah 54:10 expressed it this way, "Though mountains may tremble and hills may fade away, My Love For You Will Never Die."²

The word El in Beth-El is the singular form of a word I'm sure you are familiar with: *Eloheynu*. Our most common blessing formula begins with the words: *Baruch-Ata-Adonai-Eloheynu*. *Baruch* means "blessed," *Ata* "you," *Adonai* we've just covered. So let us now consider *Adonai Eloheynu*. *Adonai* is the singular, personal name for God that we use. *Eloheynu* means "Our God," and is in the plural. Every time we say a Jewish blessing we are acknowledging our place as individuals within a community in relationship with God. We are not saying "Blessed is My God" or "Blessed is Our God" but rather "Blessed are You, Adonai (my God), (who is) **Our** God, sovereign of the Universe..."³

Our blessing formula is similar to our most iconic Yom Kippur prayers, the *Al Het* and the *Ashamnu*, in that even as we pray as individuals, we situate ourselves within our community. We take responsibility not only for our own transgressions but for the transgressions of others, even if we ourselves did not commit the particular *het*. We say "*Al Het She-Hatanu Lefanech*,"

² Translation and chant by Rabbi Shefa Gold.

³ My thinking here was clarified by Rabbi Levi Weiman-Kelman of Jerusalem.

“**WE** have missed the mark before You, God” and “*Ashamnu, Bagadnu, Gazalnu, Debarnu Dofj,*”
“We betray, we are cruel, we speak falsely.”

In my first week of rabbinic studies we were asked to draw a moment when we had experienced God. I found myself drawing the lakefront at the Jewish summer camp where I grew up in Three Rivers, Michigan. I was standing at the lake, freshly showered, with the wind blowing in from across the water on Friday afternoon during *Kabbalat Shabbat davenning*. This image combines the closeness to something greater than myself that I experience when I am out in nature with the connection that I feel while I am singing. In the next year, I would like to invite you to join me in musical and meditative experiences in the chapel. Perhaps we might even explore a lovely site that I just discovered... the river bank in Holiday Park. Between now and then I hope we will have other services, gatherings, and experiences outdoors as weather permits.

I also LOVE music and can truly relax and let go while listening to beautiful live music or singing with other people. On Rosh Hashanah I had the opportunity to thank Rabbis Dennis & Sandy for their mentorship and friendship. Today I would like to say to Cantor Melissa, I grew up and became a Bat Mitzvah in a congregation with a powerful soprano voice in Cantor Alane Katzew. Being in High Holiday services with Cantor Melissa has allowed me in my adult life to experience what my childhood synagogue experiences sounded and felt like - - - in the best possible way!

Some of you may have noticed that I also have a mystical streak which I was as surprised as anyone to discover. I found my way to sacred Hebrew chanting through my love of music when, on the first day of rabbinical school our afternoon prayers consisted of chanting one specially selected verse of Torah over and over again for 15 min. By the end of that first day I was hooked on meditational chant and since then have attended three different week long retreats where I have spent several hours each day chanting with Rabbi Shefa Gold, the preeminent Jewish chant teacher. If you are interested in combining the intellectual pursuit of God with the mystical, join me and my merry band at 9AM on Shabbat mornings for our Tour d’Torah. We begin and end our study each week with a short chant.

I have spoken of my intellectual, natural, musical, and mystical experiences of the Divine. That leaves one category that I noted earlier in this talk – Experiencing God through acts of social justice. I addressed this on Rosh Hashanah when I spoke about Zedeck. One of the most important Jewish philosophers of the 20th Century was a French Jew named Emmanuel Levinas. He wrote that the only way to fulfill the commandment or mitzvah to serve God in every moment is to serve the other who is right before you, whether your neighbor, the stranger or any other human being. For, as Levinas writes, the trace of The Other (God) is on the face of the other (the person you are serving).

Levinas’ ideas can be applied to the feeling of connection we feel when we take care of our children, parents, close friends or even strangers in their hour of need. They can also be applied to feeling God’s presence in the support of a just cause. A little over 10 years ago, on May 1, 2006, I marched with 200,000 people, many of them immigrants, on the streets of Manhattan. I could feel the excitement of those who were publicly celebrating May Day in

their adopted country, like they had in the countries of their birth. We were marching for comprehensive immigration reform, but on a much deeper level it was about basic respect for immigrants, love of the stranger as affirmed thirty six times in the Torah.

As I approached Union Square Park to join the march, I could see a sea of people. I thought of the photograph that hung in my office of Emma Goldman speaking at a rally in this very same park in 1916. As I looked across the vast expanse of humanity the energy and electricity that I felt revealed to me the presence of God! God was hovering above us and moving through us! It was reminiscent of the famous words uttered by Abraham Joshua Heschel as he marched from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, "I felt as though my feet were praying." The crowd was much larger than the police had estimated, and as we marched up Broadway I noticed that all the police were standing off to the side and removing the barricades so that the crowd could expand. As we chanted, "Whose Streets? Our Streets!" the refrain became true for me for the very first time.

Between Rosh HaShanah and this morning's sermon I have explored two of the three Hebrew words in our congregation's name: Beth-El Zedeck. Let's take a few moments to examine the word Beth, in the Ashkenazi pronunciation, or Beit, in Modern Hebrew. Beit means "house" and there are many different ways to call a synagogue in our tradition: Beit Keneset, the House where the Community Congregates; Beit Midrash, the House of Study; Beit Tefilah, the House of Prayer. The Ancient Temple in Jerusalem was called the Beit HaMikdash, The Place where we Experience Holiness. A House is where we can experience hospitality, welcome, fulfillment, and protection. A House is where we can learn, grow, practice and be inspired to righteousness. Rabbi Sidney Greenberg best expresses my hopes for our congregation in an opening prayer he composed for his Shabbat Siddur: *Likrat Shabbat*. He writes:

May the door of this synagogue be wide enough
to receive all who hunger for love,
all who are lonely for fellowship.

May it welcome all who have cares to unburden,
thanks to express, hopes to nurture.

May the door of this synagogue be narrow enough
to shut out pettiness and pride, envy and enmity.

May this synagogue be, for all who enter,
the doorway to a richer and more meaningful life⁴.

Today I have explored the historical and intellectual meanings behind *Adonai* and *Eloheynu* and shared my own musical, mystical, natural, and social justice experiences of the Divine. I would like to invite you to share with me in the year ahead: What does Beth-El mean to you? How do you most easily connect with God or a force greater than yourself and outside of yourself? What names for God best speak to you? As we step into the New Year of 5777, let

⁴ Page 17.

us ask ourselves in what ways we will resolve to reconnect and renew our relationship with the Divine in this Beth-El Zedeck, in our personal lives, in our homes, and our community. I wish you God-speed and blessings on your journey. L'Shanah Tovah Tikatevu v'tehatemu – May you be inscribed and sealed for joys and goodness in the Book of Life!