

## Return to God

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For our sages, God could be both far and near. As the Creator of the heavens and the earth, God was distant, far beyond the created world. When they spoke of God in this way, the Sages would call God, *Hamakom*, “The Place” indicating that God was not in the world but the world was in God, therefore God was “The Place” of the world.

At the same time, they felt God near them, close by, protecting them, even as a mother protects her young. When they spoke of God in this way, the Sages called God *Shechinah*, the “Presence,” saying that God is present to us in our world. Both *Hamakom* and *Shechinah* are human conceptions, so the Sages assigned the human attributes, saying that *Hamakom* was the masculine side of God and *Shechinah* was God’s feminine side. Of course, the Sages worshipped the One God. The two names they said were just expressions of their feelings.

When is the experience of the nearness of the *Shechinah* most acute?

From the Mishnah, Rabbi Chalafta ben Dosa taught: When ten people sit together and study the Torah, the *Shechinah* sits with them. We prove this since ten people are necessary for a minyan [or a congregation] for public prayer and scripture teaches “God attends the congregation of the godly” (Ps 82:1).

Can we show that the *Shechinah* is also present in the company of five people? Yes, for five people are required to speak of a group and scripture records, “God had founded God’s group upon the earth” (Amos 9:6).

Can we show that the *Shechinah* is also present in the company of three people? Yes, for three judges are required for a court and scripture asserts, “God judges among the judges” (Ps 82:1).

Can we show that the *Shechinah* is also present in the company of two people? Yes, for scripture declares “Then they the revered God spoke one with the other” (Malachi 3:16).

And can we show that the *Shechinah* is also present even with only one person? Yes, because God avers: “In every place where I cause My name to be remembered, I will come to you and I will bless you” (Ex 20:24)<sup>1</sup>.

And so tonight, we are in a place where we wish to cause God’s name to be remembered. Tonight begins our Day of Atonement, our Yom Kippur. Today is the day when we come before God.

That concept in and of itself however might be problematic for some. We use terms such as Malkeinu, Adonai, Hamakom, Shechinah, Avinu. Our High Holy Day liturgy is filled with words and terms for the Divine. This new *machzor* tries to add even

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Avot 3:6 (as found in *The Essential Jewish Stories*, pg 27)

a few more. But sometimes I worry that the God depicted in the *machzor* and our readings still do not capture the totality that is God.

With that in mind, I want to read you a piece of writing which really grabbed me this year, though she wrote it in 1990s by Rabbi Margaret Wenig; it's called, "God is a woman and She's Growing Older".

I offer this not as a replacement for the image of God found in our liturgy, but as an alternative conception of God that might be helpful to those who may feel alienated by the traditional High Holy Day image. Here's what she writes<sup>2</sup>:

God is a woman and she is growing older. She moves more slowly now. She cannot stand erect. Her face is lined. Her voice is scratchy. Sometimes she has to strain to hear. God is a woman and she is growing older; yet, she remembers everything.

On Rosh Hashanah, the anniversary of the day on which she gave us birth, God sits down at her kitchen table, opens the Book of Memories, and begins turning the pages; and God remembers.

"There, there is the world when it was new and my children when they were young." As she turns each page she smiles, seeing before her, like so many dolls in a department store window, all the beautiful colors of our skin, all the varied shapes and sizes of our bodies. She marvels at our accomplishments: the music we have written, the gardens we have planted, the stories we have told, the ideas we have spun.

"They now can fly faster than the winds I send," she says to herself, "and they sail across the waters which I gathered into seas. They even visit the moon which I set in the sky. But they rarely visit me." There pasted into the pages of her book are all the cards we have ever sent to her when we did not bother to visit. She notices our signatures<sup>3</sup> scrawled beneath the printed words someone else has composed.

Then there are the pages she would rather skip. Things she wishes she could forget. But they stare her in the face and she cannot help but remember: her children spoiling the home she created for us, brothers putting each other in chains. She remembers seeing us racing down dangerous roads—herself unable to stop us. She remembers the dreams she had for us—dreams we never fulfilled. And she remembers the names, so many names, inscribed in the book, names of all the children she has lost through war and famine, earthquake and accident, disease and suicide. And God remembers the many times she sat by a bedside weeping that she could not halt the process she herself set into motion. On Yom Kippur, God lights candles, one for each of her children, millions of candles lighting up the night making it bright as day. God stays awake all night turning the pages of her book.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://rabbiandrewjacobs.org/2010/09/05/god-is-a-woman-and-she-is-growing-older/> [original essay published in 1990 by Rabbi Margaret Wenig]

God is lonely, longing for her children, her playful ones. All that dwells on earth does perish. But God endures, so she suffers the sadness of losing all that she holds dear.

God is home, turning the pages of her book. “Come home,” she wants to say to us, “Come home.” But she won’t call. For she is afraid that we will say, “No.” She can anticipate the conversation: “We are so busy. We’d love to see you but we just can’t come. Too much to do.”

Even if we don’t realize it, God knows that our business is just an excuse. She knows that we avoid returning to her because we don’t want to look into her age-worn face. It is hard for us to face a god who disappointed our childhood expectations: She did not give us everything we wanted. She did not make us triumphant in battle, successful in business and invincible to pain. We avoid going home to protect ourselves from our disappointment and to protect her. We don’t want her to see the disappointment in our eyes. Yet, God knows that it is there and she would have us come home anyway.

What if we did? What if we did go home and visit God? What might it be like?

God would usher us into her kitchen, seat us at her table and pour two cups of tea. She has been alone so long that there is much she wants to say. But we barely allow her to get a word in edgewise, for we are afraid of what she might say and we are afraid of silence. So we fill an hour with our chatter, words, words, so many words. Until, finally, she touches her finger to her lips and says, “Shh. Sha. Be still.”

Then she pushes back her chair and says, “Let me have a good look at you.” And she looks. And in a single glance, God sees us as both newly born and dying: coughing and crying and laughing and dancing, as a young child afraid of the road ahead and as an old person looking back wondering where the years went.

In a single glance she sees our birth and our death and all the years in between. She sees us as we were when we were young: when we idolized her and trustingly followed her anywhere<sup>12</sup>; when our scrapes and bruises healed quickly, when we were filled with wonder at all things new. She sees us when we were young, when we thought that there was nothing we could not do.

She sees our middle years too: when our energy was unlimited. When we kept house, cooked and cleaned, cared for children, worked, and volunteered—when everyone needed us and we had no time for sleep.

And God sees us in our later years: when we no longer felt so needed; when chaos disrupted the bodily rhythms we had learned to rely upon. She sees us sleeping alone in a room which once slept two.

God sees things about us we have forgotten and things we do not yet know. For naught is hidden from God’s sight.

When she is finished looking at us, God might say, “So tell me, how *are* you?” Now we are afraid to open our mouths and tell her everything she already knows<sup>14</sup>: whom we love; where we hurt; what we have broken or lost; what we wanted to be when we grew up.

So we change the subject. “Remember the time when...”

“Yes, I remember,” she says. Suddenly we are both talking at the same time; saying all the things the greeting cards never said:

“I’m sorry that I...”

“That’s alright, I forgive you.”

“I didn’t mean to...”

“I know that. I do.”

We look away. “I never felt I could live up to your expectations.”

“I always believed you could do anything,” she answers.

“What about your future?” she asks us. We do not want to face our future. God hears our reluctance, and she understands.

We are growing older as God is growing older. How much like her we have become.

God holds our face in her two hands and whispers, “Do not be afraid, I will be faithful to the promise I made to you when you were young. I will be with you. Even to your old age I will be with you. When you are grey headed still I will hold you. I gave birth to you, I carried you. I will hold you still. Grow old along with me....”

Our fear of the future is tempered now by curiosity. The universe is infinite. Unlimited possibilities are arrayed before us still. We can awaken each morning to wonder: What shall I learn today? What can I create today? What will I notice that I have never seen before?

It has been a good visit. Before we leave, it is our turn to take a good look at God. The face which time has marked looks not frail to us now—but wise. For we understand that God knows those things only the passage of time can teach: that one can survive the loss of a love; that one can feel secure even in the midst of an ever changing world; that there is dignity in being alive even when every bone aches. God’s movements seem not slow to us—but strong and intent, unlike our own. For we are too busy to see beneath the surface. We speak too rapidly to truly listen, and we move too quickly to feel what we touch. We form opinions too fast to judge honestly. While God, God moves slowly and with intention. God sees everything there is to see, understands everything God hears, and touches all that lives.

Ahh, that is why we were created to grow older: each added day of life, each new year make us more like God who is ever growing older.

How often do we sit in the house of prayer holding in our hands pages of greeting cards bound together into a prayer book, hundreds of words we ourselves have not written. Will we merely place our signatures at the bottom and drop the cards – the prayer book – in the mail?

God would prefer that we come home. She is waiting for us, ever patiently until we are ready. God will not sleep. She will leave the door open and the candles burning waiting patiently for us to come home.

Perhaps one day...perhaps one day we will be able to look into God's aging face and say, "*Avinu Malkeinu*, our Parent, our Ruler, we have come home."

Today is a day for coming home. It minimally matters how long we have been away, as long as we are willing to return. Over the last ten days of awe, we engaged in teshuva, repentance, with others. Today, we engage in it with ourselves and with God.

From *Pesikta Rabbati* we read about "A king had a son who had gone astray from his father a journey of a hundred days. His friends advised him, "You should return to your father." The son said, "I cannot." Then the king sent a message saying, "Return as far as you can and I will come to you the rest of the way." So God says, "Return to me, and I will return to you."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever concept of the Divine each of us might hold, today is the day to for coming home.

When first we are created, we are each tied to God by a string. With every sin we commit, the string is broken. If we repent, the angel Gabriel makes a knot in our string. In the course of a human lifetime, each string becomes full of knots. All this is in accordance with God's plan. For, you see, a string with knots is short than one with no knots, and string with a great many knots is still shorter. In this way, repentance brings us even closer to God<sup>4</sup>.

Through teshuva, repentance, let us try to come closer to God. Through self-reflection let us try to find the nearness we seek. Let us this yom kippur, this high holy day season, this year of 5777, return home. Ken yehi ratzon. G'mar chatimah tovah.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Essential Jewish Stories*, pg 379 [Pesikta Rabbati 184]

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid* pg 378 [internet anecdote]