

Cultivating an Awareness of the Divine
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For years I have driven through the Delaware Water Gap always marveling at the structure of the rocks and the striking beauty but mostly paid attention to the road. I noticed the signs where one could pull off the road for a scenic view or for a hike along a trail but I was always focused on reaching my destination.

Until this Summer, when my husband, David, and I, decided to choose the DWG as our destination. Excited to spend time in nature we ironically first turned to technology--- surfing the internet and trying to decipher which of the many park entrances should we choose. The park ranger at the information center was helpful and explained a few of the trails close by and further away. She asked what level of challenge we'd like and I naively responded that any was fine.

Surprising or not, the maps were a bit unclear to us---where was the entrance to the trail we selected. We ended up beginning on a white dot trail --part of the Appalachian trail--- although we had intended to be on the red dot trail. We *turned* around and eventually located another entry point with the red dots. Within about 2 seconds I learned that the challenging trail lived up to its name. A steep ascent was immediately followed by about 50 yards of low incline and then the rest of the trail was up. Actually, this was not really a trail but rather a pile of rocks. I enjoy the challenge of climbing and found myself surprised by how intense this was.

No one told us to go on this hike. This was not God's commandment. This was purely a married couple's desire to spend some time together in nature.

We stopped often to notice the view; the rocks; the hills; the sky; the trees; It was not possible to notice everything while walking/climbing because each of the rocks called our attention to it---to the careful placement of our feet to insure we did not fall.

We had to pay close attention. This required focus; hard work; connection to the earth; an awareness of what surrounded us and I hope—God. We marveled at the magnificence of creation.

Making the time to be together---for a long walk; an intense hike; to enjoy the fresh air; picturesque views---heightens my awareness of God's presence in the world.

What causes us to be present---truly present/mindful in our daily lives?

The trials of our lives.....do we find God out of the depths of despair, in the highs of joyous moments and/or everywhere or somewhere in between?

Our Torah portion, Akedat Yitzhak, is one of the more challenging passages from the Torah. Yet, we read it each year on Rosh Hashanah, compelling us to awaken to the challenge of this Holy Day season.

They went out for a walk; the two of them together.
There was a lot of silence. They had three days together.
One knew –or so he thought---
The purpose of the walk.

The rabbis of old and more recent days have waxed poetic on this passage. It begins with, “Some time afterward, God put Abraham to the test.” [Gen 22:1] This was likely the 10th test Abraham faced and honestly, if we look back at all that Abraham had done, does it seem like he needed another test? It was just a few chapters earlier where he challenged God in the case of Sodom and Gemorah---asking God not to destroy the cities if enough righteous people could be found to create a healthy community.

I too find this passage quite troubling and over the years have decided that Abraham definitely failed God’s test. How could he comply with such a demand? Why would he challenge God on behalf of strangers yet remain silent concerning his own son?

But when God spoke, Abraham responded: Hineni. I am here. I am ready. I am listening to you God. I am fully present.

Think of a time in your life when you truly had to “wake up” or “be awoken”
Was it a time of joy or a time of challenge?
Was it something that happens everyday?

Rabbi Joshua Heller remarks (in Rabbi Dov Peretz Elkins *Rosh Hashana Readings*, p. 126),

“It took an unfathomable divine decree, for Abraham to be truly present with his son. All of us face the test of Abraham. Will it take a moment of crisis before we walk together with those we love?”

God is in our lives---

It’s not easy to pay attention and notice something greater...

I believe in God and confess I have many uncertainties. How can I know what is beyond my comprehension. Yet, I do know that there have been times when I have felt something greater...

As Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser wrote [DP Elkins RH Readings]

“I’ve not seen the robin but I know he is there
because I heard him singing through my window from
the tree-top outside.

I have not seen God. But I have looked at my child’s eye,
and have been overwhelmed by the miracle of unfolding
life.

I have watched the trees bedeck themselves with new garbs of
green in the spring.
and have been stirred by the miracle of continual rebirth.
I have looked at the stars, and have been overcome by the
miracle of the grandeur
and the majesty of the universe.
I know that God exists, because I have heard the song of God's
presence
from all the tree-tops of creation.”

Does a crisis event jar us into awareness---enabling us to notice what is truly important?
Why can't we remain more in tune with what really matters day in day out?

There is much to be learned from this text which is why we turn it and turn it....reading
and rereading this Torah portion this year, two phrases ring out to me.

The first phrase, actually, a single word, is Hineni.

Being present.

Hineni.

The cantor recited this prayer in our Rosh Hashanah Musaf service. It says, God I am
here. I am overcome by awe and trembling in the presence of God who abides amid the
praises of Israel.

Vayomer Avraham; Vayomer Hineni.

God spoke Abraham's name. Abraham [responded]: I am here.

Hineni—I am here---I am fully present. There are other places in the Torah where an
individual said 'hineni'. When Moses noticed the bush burned but was not consumed, he
responded to God's call to him-and said, hineni. Rabbi Lawrence Kushner explains that
one truly needs to pay attention to notice if a fire is burning. If you have a fireplace and
use real wood, you know it takes time to see if the wood is kindling. This meant Moses
had to be patient to notice this special occurrence. The rabbis of the midrash remind us
that God can appear to us anywhere—even in a thorn bush for no place is devoid of the
Divine presence.

How often do we respond immediately when our name is called?

What does it mean to be fully present for another individual in this age of technology?

How do we unhook from the on-line and link in to another; heart to heart.

Our lives are hectic and though we can stay in touch wherever we are, we sometimes
forget to take a break. Staying connected to one another and the world is good but
sometimes we hide in the virtual connections and fail to go deeper.

There are times where we experience a sense of something greater than us---a holy
encounter. It may be hard to articulate but exploring and discussing our thoughts of God
is part of being Jewish. In his book, Jewish Theology In our Time, Rabbi Elliot Cosgrove
remarks, “Theological inquiry has sustained the Jewish People. Without it, Judaism
becomes a dry, brittle, and lifeless artifact.”

German theologian Martin Buber explains God through relationships. Most of our interactions with one another are utilitarian. In other words, I ask you to please pass the apples and honey. Thank you for clearing the table. Please turn off your car and don't idle anywhere, etc. This is called an I-It encounter.

There are other moments when we feel a sense of something other. When we realize that we felt something special, we know that it was an I-Thou encounter. God was surely there and we felt it.

As soon as we are able to describe it or explain it, we have returned to an I-It state. I-Thou can happen between people and can also occur between an individual and God.

Perhaps this is what happened for our ancestor Abraham. Abraham was truly present for God.

A bit later in the Akeda narrative, [Gen 22:7], Isaac spoke to his father and Abraham responded "I am here." Hineni. Abraham used the same word to speak to his son Isaac as he used to speak to God. Abraham was fully present for God and for his son.

A second phrase, appearing in two verses (6 and 8), speaks about Abraham and Isaac and tells us "Vayelchu shneyhem yachdav"
And the two of them walked off together.

What does it mean to walk together? They had already been walking for three days. In silence. Isaac will soon ask the haunting question—where is the sheep for the burnt offering.

Being present.
Walking together. Walking with God. This also brings to mind images of Abraham's first test from God to *lech l'cha*, go forth...go on a journey, a long walk.

As for Abraham and Isaac's walk, let's focus on the first few words—*vayelchu shnayhem yachdav*---and the two of them walked together.

What does it mean to walk with someone or with God?
It means really being present. When a friend or family member is in need---we are there. We show up physically and bring our whole selves, sans distractions.

When a loved one wants to share a happy time---we are there-----sharing their joy----and do it well when we are fully present, witnessing for them; kvelling with them.

When we make a habit of reflection, prayer, meditation....we may find a particular time when we feel something beyond---an awareness of the Divine.
Spiritual practice can help us find a greater sense of God in our lives. Making time for quiet, focus, prayer, meditation, chanting....are some of the paths available to us.

How do we notice God in our lives?

How do we live with a sense of Buber's I-thou---a sense of holiness?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of "radical amazement" as a way of recognizing God's presence in the world. His beautiful book, *The Sabbath*, discusses the importance of sanctifying time and also emphasizes the importance of separating from technology to heighten awareness of the Divine.

Rabbi Art Green, Rector of Hebrew College in Boston considers himself a neo-mystic. He draws on the language of Kabbalah and Hasidism. He explains in his most recent book, *Radical Judaism*, his understanding of God in panentheist terms meaning God is present throughout all of existence. God is the inner force of existence itself. We read in the Psalms, *M'lo chol ha'aretz kvodo*----the whole earth is full of God's glory

What helps us to notice God in our lives?

When we experience pain, sadness or death, we may reach out to God;

When we rejoice over our blessings---the birth of a new child; the new job; the clean medical report----- the intensity of our emotions may raise our awareness of the Sacred.

But to notice God in the everyday we need to engage in regular practice. Judaism offers many entry points including:

Daily prayer-where we can start with two-three words—Thank you God or Modeh Ani.

We can recite these words when we awake each morning, thanking God for the new day;

Meditation such as breathing---and pausing to connect with your breath—clearing your mind of other distractions---just feeling God's breath of life moving through you;

Taking a break from your daily routine to go on a walk to clear your mind and connect inward;

Mindful eating---actually noticing your food (which means not eating while multi-tasking on a conference call, doing work on your desk and using your cell phone)—often done in silence;

Spiritual exercise—connecting with friends at the gym but beyond that---being in tune with your body and thanking God for the gift of life---

All of these and more are possible daily practices.

In Proverbs we learn:

Happy is the person who listens to Me

Wakeful to My doorways each day.

Watching at the entries to My gate,

For the One who finds me, finds life." [8:34-35]

Daily prayer; daily practice....we live most of the time in the 'in-betweens'---

It is through regular routine that we attune ourselves to God's presence in our lives.

Vayelchu shneyhem yachdav. And the two of them walked together.

And God's presence---in each of us---perhaps enables us to respond more readily

Hineni

Abraham was ready to respond to God and to his son: Hineni.

In this New Year, 5771, I pray we each set a practice of intention to arouse our awareness of the Divine in our lives and in our world. I pray we strive to experience everyday as a mindful walk in which we pay attention with a listening heart to the sound of our name being called and are fully present for each other and God.

Vayomer Elohim--Hineni. Amen.