



## **Erev Rosh Hashanah Sermonette 5772/2011**

Older Family Service  
Cantor Michael Shochet

Shana tova to everyone. Here we are celebrating the start of another new year. And we're doing a good job at it. Shir Harmony sounds so great singing the prayers. All of you are participating in full voice, chanting the traditional Hebrew prayers, going through the rituals that have been handed down to us from centuries of Jews before.

This is all great... we are very good at ritual... Judaism is a religion of deed over creed. In other words, our Jewish tradition teaches that religion relates to a person's actions...what we do... that's deed... not primarily what we believe...that's creed.

However, we need a little creed to make us want to do the deed. What I mean is, a certain amount of belief in God is needed to form the basis of our actions.

So, I'd like to see, by the show of hands, how many of you:

- 1) believe in God? (probably a lot)
- 2) how many of you understand God's role in your life (not as many).

For many of you, I imagine that you fluctuate --- or have fluctuated over time -- on the subject of God.

And so, tonight, I want to spend some time talking about Our Creator... Adonai Eloheinu, the Sovereign of the Universe... haShem... The Lord our God... yud-Hay-Vav-Hay...Avinu Malkeinu...Ha Kadosh Baruch Hu... Our Father, our Mother, our Parent...the big cheese in the sky...whatever names we have for God...and there are many.

I want to speak about God because we don't often do this. We read the Bible...study the Torah...recite lots of prayers...maybe even use the word "pray" often...and definitely use the word God a lot in our daily lives... but do we really have an understanding of what God's role is in our lives?

When I was your age, Shir Harmony, and I went to Temple, and Religious School, God was not often discussed. We talked more about the deed than the creed.... Understanding social action over spiritual action.

But now we live in a different time. Spirituality has been the buzzword for quite some time, and we Jews, by and large, don't know what to do with that. Many of my Christian friends do... when one of them says, "I was praying for you," I'm not sure what that really means. So, let's talk about God.

Perhaps lets begin by asking the question, "Where is God?" A few years ago, when our then Student Cantor, Rebecca Robins, began a new t'fillah during Religious School for students in grades K & 1... and some of you might have been there, then... she started out by asking every student when they walked in the sanctuary to sit in the place where they felt God was in this room. Where did most of the kids go? Right up here on the bimah, by the Ark. But isn't your seat, just as holy as our seats?

An old Chassidic story tries to answer the question about where is God...

A man was going from village to village, from rabbi to rabbi, asking the same question: "Where can I find God?" he was never satisfied with the answers he received, so he would pack his bag and move on to the next village.

Some of the rabbis told him, "Pray, my son, and you'll find God." But the man had tried to pray and he could not.

And some replied, "Study, my child, and you shall find God." But the studies seemed dry and irrelevant. The more he read, the more confused he became -- and the further removed from God he seemed to be.

And some rabbis said, "Forget your quest, my child. God is within you." But the man had tried to find God within himself, and failed.

One day, the man arrived, weary and discouraged, at a very small village set in the middle of a forest. He went up to a woman who was minding some chickens. She asked who he could be looking for in such an isolated place, but she did not seem surprised when he told her he was looking for God. She quickly finished her chores and escorted him to the rabbi's house.

When he went in, the rabbi was studying. The man waited a moment, but he was impatient to be off to the next village if he could not be satisfied. So, he interrupted: "Rabbi! How do I find God?"

The rabbi paused, and the man wondered which of the many answers he had already heard the rabbi would give. But the rabbi said simply, "You've come to the right place, my child. God is in this village. Why don't you stay for a few days? You might meet God."

The man was puzzled. He did not understand what the rabbi could mean. But the answer was unusual. It intrigued him enough to stay.

For two or three days he explored every corner of the tiny village. He would ask the villagers where God was that day, but they would only smile and invite him to have a meal with them.

Gradually, he got to know them and even helped with some of the village work. Every now and then, by chance, he would see the rabbi, and the rabbi would ask him, "Have you met God yet, my son?" And the man would smile and sometimes he understood, and sometimes he did not understand. For months he stayed in the village, and then for years. He became part of the village life and shared in all the activities. He went to the synagogue on Friday and prayed with the rest of the community, and sometimes he knew why he prayed and sometimes he did not.

And he would join one of the families for a Friday night meal, and when they talked about God, he was always assured that God was in the village, though no one was quite sure where God could be found.

Gradually, he, too, began to believe that God was in the village, though he wasn't quite sure where. He knew, though, that sometimes he had met God.

One day, the rabbi said to him, "You have met God now, have you not?" And the man said, "Thank you, Rabbi, I think I have. But I'm not sure why I met God or how or when. And why is God only in this village?"

The rabbi replied: "God is not a person, my child, or a thing. You cannot meet God in that way. You were so caught up in the question that you could not hear the answers. Now that you can find God, you can return to your village, if you wish."

So the man went back to his town, and God went with him.

And the man prayed and studied, and knew that God was within him and within other people. And others sensed that, and sometimes they would ask him, "Where can we find God?" And the man would always answer, "You have come to the right spot. God is in this place."

You see, this story teaches us the most important lesson about finding God... I believe God is not in this corner of the room, or that corner of the room... up there (point up)...in the Ark... or at home or school, but rather God is in here. (chest). Which means, God goes wherever we go, and therefore we can access God at any time, in any place.

The next question about God is "How can we describe God?" When you think of God in your head, some of you may think of an old man, perhaps sporting a white beard, up in heaven, looking down on us. Sometimes we need to picture something in our minds even though we're not quite sure if it's right.

But really, if God is in here, (chest), than each of us must describe God differently. God will be whatever each of us experiences. You see, I'm reminded of the famous legend about the blind men and the elephant. Do you know that one? A group of blind men came upon an elephant. The first one walked into something large and very hard, and said, "My friends, an elephant is like a wall." The second man, however, had stumbled first upon the tusk and yelped in pain, "What are you talking about old man? An elephant is not like a wall, it is clearly like a spear." The third man happened to take the squirming trunk in his hands, and yelled, "You're both wrong, an elephant is like a snake." The fourth man shook his head. "Ah, but you are all wrong!" Clearly an elephant is only a skinny piece of rope," as he clung onto the swinging tail. Whereupon the fifth man piped in, "No, no, no! An elephant is like a tree trunk, and I think mine is moving," as he clung to the elephant's knee.

You see, like this story tells us, we can only grasp what we individually understand about God. Each of us sees and experiences God differently. The way I understand God, may be different than the way you understand God. Since God is not a thing, but rather a force within us, we can't touch God, or see God, or smell God, but we can know what it means to have God in our life...and each of us experiences that in a different way.

For some people, having God in their life means feeling comfort when life is hard. When you are having a rough time, and someone puts their arm around you, or asks you how you're doing... God has enabled you to feel better inside... and you gain a little bit of strength in your soul.

For others, witnessing something so unusual can bring a sense of God's presence in your life. When I watched the birth of my two sons...that was a miracle. The feelings I had at that very moment...the goose bumps and the sense of awe...was God inside of me.

And sometimes God is in the conversation that you might have with a very close friend, a family member, or someone who you connect with in a special way. Ever have one of those conversations with someone...those very deep conversations, and when you're done, you feel that you just were in a moving, uplifting or transcendent experience? There was a holy bond created in that conversation. That is God.

Mostly God is in our decisions that we make...the choices we have, and how we choose to confront them. I don't believe that God makes the choice for us, but rather, gives us the wisdom, and the knowledge to make the choice ourselves, cheers us on, so to speak, when it's the right choice, and comforts us, when it's the wrong choice. Though, I do believe that when we hear inside our heads a voice telling us the right thing to do, that's God's voice.

For people who love nature, when they go on a hike and are at one with the beauty of creation, they sense God's presence all around them. Who could have made such miraculous things if not for God? God might not have made every forest or every mountain, but the very first seed, the very first speck of dirt, may have been God's, then nature took over and made lots of new trees and forests and dirt and more.

Some scientists dispute that God created the world. But some sight God's work in creation. Albert Einstein, the great Jewish scientist said "his work in science, was just tracing the lines which flow from God."

I believe God created the essence of our world... wrote the blueprints that put us all here, but it's up to each of us, to bring God's plan to fruition by making the right choices, helping others, having those relationships in our life that help us feel God's presence.

And so, when someone says they are praying for you, perhaps it means they are hoping that you truly can access God in your life, in a meaningful way.

But is God all-powerful? Can God cause good to happen? If the answer is yes, than God must also be able to stop evil from happening too. Unfortunately, we know this is not the case, since there is evil all around. How can you explain the tragic killing of innocent people such as in the Holocaust, or 9-11, or fires, floods or earthquakes? Some of us might ask, in the face of tragedy, "Why did God let this happen?" If God was all-powerful, couldn't God stop that stuff?

My answer is this. God doesn't make the good or the bad things happen. But rather God gives us free will – the ability to choose right from wrong, good

from evil. By giving us free will, we know that some people will make bad choices.

But what about the bad stuff in the world that doesn't come from other people, like hurricanes, earthquakes and floods? One of the best-known bible stories is about Noah and the Flood. The Torah tells us God caused the flood to destroy the earth, wipe out civilization so that God could start anew. God did this, according to the Torah, because the people were sinners. In this case, life is depicted as a game of chess, where God is the great Chess Master and we are the pawns. God directs our lives for good or bad. But what if life is not like a game of chess, but rather like a game of backgammon. In backgammon, the players throw dice to determine their moves. It's all by chance, random. God gave us the game and we're the players. The roll of the dice is random, but what we do once those dice land is up to us. In other words, what happens in the universe at times may be random. God is present with us, in our decisions of how we respond to the roll of the dice.

When the Hurricane just last month destroyed homes and people's possessions, people came from all over to help...to help people they didn't even know. God might not have been able to stop the flood, but surely the God in each one of those volunteers was jumping into action. Don't you think the people who lost so much felt so blessed by the people who came to help them in their time of need?

There's a great prayer in our prayer books that help frame this idea a little better. It says: Prayer invites God to let God's presence suffuse (or fill) our spirits, to let God's will prevail in our lives. Prayer can not bring water to parched fields, nor mend a broken bridge, nor rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.

So where is God in the bad times? God is right there with us, crying too, but embracing us, helping us to move forward, and encouraging us to help others.

And when the time comes that you are so mad about something that happened...it's okay to be mad at God too. The name of the Jewish people in Hebrew is Yisrael, which means, the one who wrestles with God. It is in our makeup to argue with God, to wrestle with the Divine presence in our lives.

But once you question God, or argue with God, make sure you listen to God's response. You may hear that response loud and clear in your kishka's... your soul... to help you move forward.

Finally, remember that God is not just in our lives at the extraordinary times. God is also there in the ordinary times. Whether it's changing a diaper, playing catch with your child, or with your mom or dad, holding a door open, saying hello to someone walking past you, or saying thank you when someone gives you something. Knowing that God is in these moments too can lift our spirits and infuse us with additional spiritual nourishment.

Remember that God does not just live here in the synagogue. God goes wherever you go.

We need to continue to make the world better with our actions, with our deeds, but we need to remember that the voice inside of us causing us to do those actions, those deeds, is God's... and that is our creed.

When you go to sleep tonight, listen to your heartbeat, hear your breath... That is God's voice in you.