

Finding God
Rabbi Barry M. Lutz, RJE
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To the courageous families of Temple Beth Torah of Arleta and The North Valley Reform Congregation who vision made Temple Ahavat Shalom a reality.

Several years ago I took some of our confirmation students to meet with Rabbi Harold Schulweis, one of the truly remarkable teachers of our generation. I had no agenda really, except that they should have the chance to sit at the feet of one of the true spiritual giants of our faith. After welcoming us, the Rabbi asked for two volunteers. From the raised hands he selected two and instructed them to show the rest of us “love.” (Now, don’t let your imaginations get too carried away.) As they stood there a bit embarrassed, he asked the rest of us, “How can they do this?”

“They could hug,” offered one student,

“They could kiss,” giggled another.

“True,” the Rabbi replied, “But, all of these suggestions are simply physical manifestations of the *feeling* of love, they are not actually *love* itself. In fact, he pointed out, it was not possible. While we know it is very real, one of the most powerful of human forces, you can’t see love. And yet, none of us would doubt of its existence.

On Rosh Hashanah, I suggested that this is, exactly, our experience of God. We can, through physical manifestations, express God’s existence, but, of course, we can not see God. Like love, God is not, at least by my way of thinking, some *thing* or being that exists beyond us, but rather within us.

Jewish theology is based upon this idea that God is not an object, but rather our inner source of being and potential that give meaning and purpose to our lives. And, of most significance for what I want to share today, that Divine being and potential is brought into this world by each of us. We are God’s partners in the act of creation.

We are the only ones who can bring the ideals we associate with God to life in this world, through our actions and our behavior. We are the source of God’s love. We are the source of God’s blessings. We are the source of God’s strength and support and spirit. We are the source of God’s healing.

Following my talk on Rosh Hashanah, I was asked if, given my ideas, I thought that God existed in nature, in plants and animals. I believe that God’s potential exists in all things. But, without us, without human beings acting as God’s partners, as the ones who actualize God’s creative potential, then God, in essence, does not exist in our world.

Let me give you an example to which we can all relate. Take, the Southern

California expression of fall, the fire season. Surrounding us is dry brush, containing within it the potential to burn. But, a spark must be applied to set that brush on fire, to ignite the potential contained within. With no source of ignition, there can be no fire.

So too, does God's potential exist within each of us. But, that spark must be ignited, that the Divine presence existing within each of our souls might burn with strength and brightness. Aware of God's spark we can be a source of love and compassion, of peace and repair and healing for our world.

No other creature, no other force in nature can consciously bring that potential to reality. And, just as importantly, no individual can do it alone. A single twig, burning by itself, will create a little bit of light, for a little while, but, it will quickly burn out. A blazing fire is created when there is more fuel to burn, when that flame can be passed.

We needn't talk about brush fires, though, our tradition is filled with rituals and symbols meant to make clear that for God's image to be manifest in this world, we need to fan the flame in each other. Consider the havdalah candle with which we celebrate the end of Shabbat. Havdalah with its messianic overtones is illuminated by the light of this multi-wicked candle. Many smaller flames come together to create one larger flame - a flame that is symbolic of God's presence in our world. For me, these wicks, represents each of us, who, when we bring our individual Divine sparks together, create a bright, warm, glowing flame of God's presence.

You see where I'm going don't you? How and where does God's potential get realized? How does that Divine image within each of us, manifest itself? Like love, the place where we most feel God's comforting warmth and bright presence, is in the company of others, in community. The love and compassion that flows from God's source within us, is most keenly felt in connection to others. Indeed, underlying the *mitzvot* - the ethical obligations we have towards each other, is this core value of relationship. *Mitzvot* purposefully bind us to each other in a manner that allows us to actualize God's presence in the world. In performing *mitzvot* we fan the Divine flame, causing it to burn with more intensity. This is what our sages understood when they taught, *mitzvah goreret mitzvah*: one *mitzvah* leads to another. Jewish theology makes it very clear, God is to be found in relationship, God is actualized in community. Think about where the Israelites met God while journeying through the wilderness. They joined together at the *Tent of Meeting*, it was in their joining together that they experienced God's presence. Consider the words we will read this day from the Torah, urging us to be holy - to manifest the Divine within us. How are we to do that?

Some traditions might have us meditate alone, to seek God in isolation. Not so our tradition. We express our connection to God's holiness by feeding the poor, treating our laborers fairly, by pursuing justice and respecting the elderly. That is, we actualize God's

presence in this world when we treat our relationships as sacred manifestations of the Divine.

In these moments we demonstrate God's existence as surely as a hug or kiss demonstrate our love. As Rabbi Harold Schulweis taught our confirmation students that evening, we create a place of God's presence between us. The rabbi teaches that "God [is found] in connection, in the nexus of community [in the] betweenness which binds and holds us together. It is [in that betweenness where] we find the evidence of God's reality and our own.

It is here, where we can encounter God as we encounter each other. It is here, in the reflections fostered by our prayers, that our own spark of godliness is given the opportunity to grow and mature. It is here, in the strength and support that we offer to each other where that Divine spark within us is nurtured and strengthened, helping us to stand up to the many life challenges that continually threaten to knock us to our knees. And it is here, when we join together, in the ritual observance of life's transitions that the flame of God's presence blesses and renews us.

It was the need for this kind of community, where God's betweenness could be nurtured, that brought together 22 families, on August 22, 1965, in order to form this community. On that Sunday evening, forty years ago, families from Temple Beth Torah of Arleta and the North Valley Reform Congregation joined together to form this community. What was it exactly that brought these families together? Certainly, like many of us, there was the need to provide their children a Jewish education ... But there was something more, something, that perhaps, they could not readily express, but that nonetheless, was a powerful motivating factor. They understood, somehow, that they needed each other in order to nurture the godliness within themselves and in order to bring God's presence into the life of this community. More than for their children, they needed community for themselves

It is only due to the vision, the passion, the strength and the courage of these families that we have such a blessed and sacred place to worship today. Allow me to take just a moment to mention the names of these pioneers upon whose shoulders we stand. Sam and Sylvia Alster, Jack and Marilyn Alter, Lin and Barbara Berry, Marrella Berry, Loretta Bloomfield, Sandy and Grace Ettinger, Max and Elaine Gottesman, Evelyn Green, Gary and Bess Himler, Aaron and Elaine Hytner, Jack and Joyce Jaffe, Al and Carol Joffe, Lottie Klein, Hank and Shirley Kline, Mark and Estelle Lit, Max and Ruth Lupul, Ted and Bea Manheim, Nat and Nettie Maurer, Robert and Millie Moore, Irving and Minna Reizes, Harvey and Esther Saritzky, Mitch and Ann Schwartz. Would you please stand up so that so that we might recognize and offer our gratitude for this sacred community you created for us?

At our Shabbat services we often hear a passage which tells us: “We owe it to our ancestors to keep Torah alive, they struggled and suffered to preserve our way of life, they knew this to be their most precious gift to us.

Our Ahavat Shalom ancestors struggled in order to keep this community alive, because they knew this was, indeed a most precious gift. They knew that there was and would continue to be a need for community. A place where Torah could be brought to life, and through acts of Torah, God’s presence made a reality in our lives.

We owe it to them, to those first 22 families and others that followed, to keep this place alive, to honor their commitment, to take up the precious legacy that has been handed to us and preserve it that this sacred place of meeting, our Tent of Meeting might be handed on to the next generation.

That Shabbat passage continues: “We owe it to our children to keep Torah alive for why should they be spiritual paupers when the riches of this heritage can be theirs?”

At a recent Temple gathering the conversation turned to perspectives on our individual roles and responsibilities in this community. One participant in the discussion passionately explained that saw it as her responsibility to give her children a Jewish education. But by children, she explained, she did not mean just her own children but rather, every child who enters our doors who wants a Jewish education. She recognized the fact that without the support of those whose children were grown, she would not have been able to provide a Jewish education for her children. Now, that her children were grown, it was her responsibility to help provide the same for her “other” children. “More than that,” she said, “it is my responsibility to help provide a place where adults can come and learn. And it is my responsibility to help and provide a place where seniors can come and join together as a community, where some receive their only hot meal of the week, they aren’t my grandparents or aunts or uncles she said, but they *are* my grandparents and aunts and uncles. If I don’t take care of them, who will? If we don’t carry the flame, who will?

Another of our members wrote the following reflection:

“How many times do we talk about the TAS family? The phrase rolls off our lips so easily and so often that it could ... seem meaningless. And maybe sometimes, we do let it pass by meaninglessly until something terrible or something wonderful or some special moment of time seems to reach out and grab us and shake us and make us realize what the TAS family really means.

... We came to Temple Ahavat Shalom ... for one simple reason we wanted to raise [our daughter] as a Jew and we knew we needed help to do it. ... But I got a lot more than help in raising a Jewish daughter; I got a Jewish family. I became a Jewish son, brother, father, uncle, cousin all of it. ... I can’t even begin to explain what all it has meant to me.

The beauty of Judaism, the Temple Ahavat Shalom family, the love of my Havurah, it is more than I could ever have imagined and more than I can ever repay.

... The more I have tried to give, the more I get. I volunteer a little... I attend an Adult Education class or a Friday night service ... and suddenly, I have more family, more meaning in my life.

We joined Temple Ahavat Shalom because of the family we had. We stay at Temple Ahavat Shalom because of the family we found.”

Someone once said that, “To be religious people, to be spiritual people, we must think beyond our religion to the reason for religion: to engender the life of God in us and around us.”¹

Lying underneath the surface of the words of these two individuals, and, I am sure, the thoughts and reflections of so many of you, is the heightened sense of meaning and purpose that is found in being a part of this community. In supporting the education of all of our children, in providing a meeting place for all of our parents, in making this community our community we are engendering the life of God within us and all around us. We are keeping the flame alive.

Where else does that happen? Where else can we learn what it means to be God’s partner? Where else can we explore that possibility in our lives? Where else is that message to be heard if not here?

That Shabbat reading concludes: “We owe it to the world to keep Torah alive, this is a message which the world needs to hear.”

My friends, in a world that becomes harsher and harder, meaner and more self-centered by the minute, we have here a message which the world needs to hear.

Rabbi Naomi Levy writes, “When we struggle to repair this world, when we rise above our complacency and offer compassion, charity, and love, we are praying. When we fight to eradicate poverty, injustice, and war, when we take the time to perform acts of kindness, we are praying. When we gather the strength to give of ourselves to those who so desperately need our assistance instead of averting our gaze, we are praying.

Where else might we come to understand that our actions to bring justice and compassion and healing to this world are prayers, if not here? Where can we and our children learn to actualize the image of God that lies in our souls if not here? And where else might we go when the damp and cold world causes our flame to gutter? Where else might it be strengthened, that we might go forth God’s presence within us renewed, able once again to pass on that flame?

¹“Calling the Power of Woman” Joan Chittister, Spirituality and Health, Sept/Oct 2005

There is a wonderful story about the rabbi of a small town who was very good friends with the abbot at the local monastery.

The rabbi found his community dwindling. Life in the community was dying. He went to his friend the abbot and wept. The abbot comforted him and told him: "There is something you need to know. We have long known in our community that the Messiah is one of you."

"What," exclaimed the rabbi, "the Messiah is one of us? How can that be?"

But the abbot insisted that it was so, and the rabbi went back to his community wondering and praying, comforted and excited.

Back in the village, walking down streets, he would pass by a fellow Jew and wonder if he was the one. Sitting in the sanctuary, praying, he would hear a voice and look intently at a face and wonder if she was the one, and he began to treat everyone with added respect and kindness. It became quite noticeable.

One of the members of the congregation came to him and asked him what had happened to him. After some coaxing, he told him what the abbot had said. Soon this villager too was looking at his neighbors and wondering. The word spread quickly through the community: "the Messiah is one of us." The whole community was filled with life and kindness; and the surrounding villagers were coming to services and listening and watching intently.

The community grew and expanded and each new member was told the mystery, the truth upon which their life was based, the source of their strength and life together: "The Messiah is one of us."

And they say still, if you stumble across this place, where there is life and hope and kindness and graciousness, that the secret is the same; "The Messiah is one of us."

The truth is that the Messiah is each of us. And, as our numbers grow, so too, our power to change the world. Look around you ... sitting on each side of you is an individual who can make a difference in your life. Such transformation is possible in moments such as these, when, in the company of others who share our values, and our lives, in the betweenness of community we experience the joy, the power, the strength and the bright, flaming light of God presence.

We owe it to our ancestors We owe it to our children We owe it to the world We owe it to ourselves to make sure that flame never dies, that God's presence burns strongly and brightly from this most sacred of communities for another forty years.