

Yom Kippur Day, 5781

The question often comes up, “Where was God during the holocaust?” or on nine-eleven? Or when my loved one was dying of Covid, cancer or something else? There are probably as many answers to these questions as there are people who ask them.

For some, God was completely absent during the Holocaust. For others, God was impotent, unable to stop the madness. Some saw God as allowing people to behave in evil ways because humanity was given free will, and others saw God as fully aware, and suffering along with us.

My friend Sylvia, who is 96, has more than once referred to a letter that Elie Wiesel, of blessed memory, once wrote to the New York Times. She summed it up by saying, “He said, ‘God, I forgive you.’ Can you imagine?”

I *can* imagine, and I want to read you that letter, a Yom Kippur prayer, which was published in the Times in 1997.

“Master of the Universe, let us make up. It is time. How long can we go on being angry?

More than 50 years have passed since the nightmare was lifted.

Does this mean that the wounds in my soul have healed? They will never heal. As long as a spark of the flames of Auschwitz and Treblinka glows in my memory, so long will my joy be incomplete.

But what about my faith in you, Master of the Universe?

In my testimony I have written harsh words, burning words about your role in our tragedy. I would not repeat them today. But I felt them then. Why did you allow if not enable the killer day after day, night after night to torment, kill and annihilate tens of thousands of Jewish children?

These questions have been haunting me for more than five decades.

But at one point, I began wondering whether I was not unfair with you. Ought we not to think of your pain, too? Watching your children suffer at the hands of your other children, haven't you also suffered?

Let us make up, Master of the Universe. In spite of everything that happened? Yes, in spite. Let us make up: it is unbearable to be divorced from you so long.”

Powerful words. I don't think anyone would have blamed Wiesel if he had taken his anger to his grave, but he chose not to. He chose to let it go. He recognized that God too, suffers when people choose to follow evil instincts and behave in hurtful, destructive and violent ways.

The concept of God that I grew up with thankfully isn't the concept I now have, and that may change as I get older. When I was a kid, God was some being in heaven judging people and making things happen in the world. The God of the bible appears to be jealous and demands fidelity. The pediatric idea of God is a one-way street, and never did that seem more pronounced than on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. This was the God we fasted for, the God we prayed to, beating our hearts while we collectively begged forgiveness for "the sin we have committed by..." I still don't know what half of the sins in the Silverman machzor meant, much less whether or not I committed them! When the ark closed at the end of Neila, as the last strains of *Avinu Malkeinu* faded away, I hoped for the best.

I can't begin to imagine the horrors of the concentration, labor and death camps. Of families being torn apart, or of atrocities that a human being—so many human beings—could commit because they followed an ideology that saw Jews, gypsies, gays and disabled people as less than human.

I also can't imagine how God could have created humans who would behave that way, who wouldn't stop and think that perhaps it wasn't ok to behave like that. But as Rabbi Leo Baeck, who survived the concentration camps said, "Evil is the result of God giving man free will, and then dignifying him by not interfering."

God gave us agency to choose our thoughts and actions, to make decisions about how we will behave towards others and towards the world. There isn't one person in this world who always made the right decision in every situation. The good news is that almost all of us know the difference between right and wrong, and usually choose the right course of action. And most of us have also knowingly chosen the wrong course of action, knowing that there may be significant consequences, but taking a chance. Like a parent, I imagine God like a parent sitting at the kitchen table, head in hands, saying, "oy."

Hopefully we survived the incident and learned from it, which is what God—and our loved ones—want from us. This is the message of the Book of Jonah, which we'll look at this afternoon in our Mincha service. It's also the message of many of our other prophets, especially Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Isaiah, who prophesied before and during the Babylonian exile.

In an essay called "Power, Love and Justice, The Positive Expression of the Divine Will," bible scholar Yochanan Muffs explains how these three Divine attributes play out in the writings of the prophets, but they also underscore the liturgical themes of the High Holidays.

If we didn't believe that God has some semblance of power over and in our lives, we wouldn't be here today. If we didn't hope that God has a sense of justice that goes beyond the measure of power and law, again, there would be no point to our prayers.

For many Jews, imagining God's love is the more difficult concept, especially when tragedy comes into our lives. As a hospital chaplain, I occasionally ran into devout Christians who had no doubt that God was present in their lives and loved them. When I became involved with the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom and became friends with Muslim women and their families, I saw a similar kind of serenity and assumption. And I was jealous. I didn't get it. I'm one of the few people who would sit in a guided meditation, and when it was over and everyone else said, "aaahh" I thought, "huh?"

It turns out, I'm not alone in my feelings. In an interview, Yossi Klein Halevi, author and a senior fellow at the Shalom Hartmann Institute in Jerusalem, told my Bible professor, Dr. Job Jindo, how he "learned from Muslims to appreciate—and even 'envy'—the ease with which they experience God's presence, as something natural, even inevitable, in their lives." And, he points out, "We Jews as a people once had that. We began to lose that in the 19th century in Europe with the Enlightenment. And, of course, then came the Holocaust. I feel that we need to make our peace with God. Many, many Jews are still angry at God because of the Holocaust and I understand that. Yet for me, the center point of the Jewish people—what kept us as a people for thousands of years—was that we had an active living relationship with God, both in our personal lives and as communities. My relationship to God needs to come from being aware of God's presence in my life."

Last December, while co-leading a trip to Israel, our group davened Mincha in the synagogue at Hadassah Hospital, the one with the magnificent Chagall windows. It seemed fitting to recite a *Mishebeirach* for healing there, and to sing Debbie Friedman's song. I had chills, I had tears. I physically felt a powerful force coming through me. Did our prayer make a difference to anyone in that hospital, or whose name we mentioned? I don't know, and it doesn't matter; it made a difference to me. How do we become aware of God's presence in our lives? There's no single answer that resounds with everyone. Some feel the Divine presence in nature, in the forest, a garden or at the seashore. Some see it in the faces of other people, or in the way our pets seem to know when we need them.

As we go forward into the new year of 5781, may we be blessed to look for God's presence in our lives so that we may be in relationship with a loving, forgiving God.