

Rabbi Richard Agler
Keys Jewish Community Center
Tavernier, FL

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Kol Nidre

WHEN IS GOD?

Good evening, *g'mar chatimah tovah*.

During the High Holydays, I like to link the three major talks in one theme.

This year it is, "Touching Holiness."

Ten days ago we spoke about being part of "Sacred Community."

Tonight's topic is "When is God?"

Tomorrow we will look at "Prayer and Blessing."

So we continue.

Welcome aboard Kol Nidre airways. This is your captain speaking.

Our destination this evening is a place of greater understanding.

Conditions along the route are favorable and we expect to arrive on time.

As you know there is be no food or beverage service on this route--
or on any route served by Kol Nidre airways.

But be sure to fasten your seat belts--this may be a bumpy flight.

Okay, I spent too much time on airplanes this summer.

But have you been paying attention to some of the words

as we've gone through the *machzor*?

Here are a few that have caught mine:

Atah v'chartanu mikol ha-amim...

You have chosen us, elevating us above all the peoples. Really?

Tzaddik b'chol ma'asav...

You are just in all of your ways, righteous in all your deeds. Really?

Avinu Malkeinu, make an end to sickness, war and oppression.

Wait, you can actually do that? If we just ask nicely enough? Really?

I could go on but you get the idea.

Much of the sacred language during these sacred days

lies somewhere between challenging and problematic--at best.

I taught religious school long enough to know that after a certain age

few children who are paying attention take language like this at face value.

To say nothing of adults.

But the language is ours and it is here and so are we.

So how do we deal with it?

Some say we should ignore it, dismiss it, or even patronize it.

We're not going to do any of that.

But we can start by wondering about it.

Everyone sitting in any synagogue anywhere tonight has.

So it's fair to ask.

What exactly are we doing on this Kol Nidre eve?

Before whom are we standing?

And saying what? And why?

Seatbelts still fastened? Good.

We know these are not new questions. Since time immemorial,
 people have looked heavenward and wanted to know.
 Exactly who or what is up there?
 And what exactly is He/She/It doing? If anything? For anyone?
 We accept that there are greater forces than us around us.
 But how do we live in harmony with them?
 How do we earn their blessing?
 How do we avoid their wrath?

Theologians, poets, artists, scientists and many of the rest of us
 have been asking these questions, basically since forever.
 Over that time we have grown in understanding
 but we still have a long way to go.
 Not unlike Adam and Eve before us,
 we stand naked before a mysterious presence
 that is far more powerful than we are.

Questions like this are actually at the center of Jewish tradition.
 According to the Torah, the name *Yisrael* was given to our Patriarch Jacob
 because he wrestled with a “divine being” at the shore of the river Jabbok.
 And that became the name of our people: *Yisrael*--Israel.
 We are the ones who wrestle with God.
 Talmudic and later Rabbinic discussion on the subject of
 what exactly God does or does not do and why, is vast.
 We'll continue in that tradition tonight.
 First a disclaimer. If, as they say, all politics is local, then all theology is personal.
 And for most of us, our beliefs change over time, just as our lives do.
 So you need not agree with everything, or for that matter anything,
 I have to say on the subject.
 But we can have a conversation anyway.

Let's begin by saying that despite all the questions, contradictions and
 inconceivabilities, our God, the God of Israel, is a very great God.
 And it is good for a people, any people, to have a very great God.
 Because if God represents our highest aspirations,
 the noblest and the worthiest that is within us,
 then anything less than a very great God
 is going to produce something less than a great people.
 And since it is difficult enough for human beings simply to be decent,
 to say nothing of great, there is no point in
 placing the starting point anywhere lower.
 We don't. Our God is greater than any that can be imagined.

If I had to choose one word to describe our very great God,
 which of course by definition is impossible, I would choose “demanding.”
 Our God is nothing if not that.
 He (if you will) demands that we execute Justice and extend Compassion.

Towards one another and towards all creation—
 animal, vegetable, even mineral. (We've got resources to take care of.)
 However problematic the descriptions of God in the *machzor*,
 or in any other sacred scripture may be,
 the demand that we pursue justice and the demand that we treat others as
 we wish to be treated—are irreducible, non-negotiable and inarguable.

The Torah speaks with clarity on this:

“*Tzedek, tzedek tirdof--Justice, Justice shall you pursue*” (Deut. 16: 20) and
 “*V'ahavta l'rei'echa kamocho--You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*”
 (Lev. 19:18)

We know that the many commandments to pursue justice, in particular,
 have resonated with our people throughout the generations.
 We are proud that we have, at times, in fact been worthy of being called
 a “light unto the nations.” (Isa. 42:6)
 A God who commands us to pursue justice elevates and blesses us,
 and all of society, when we endeavor to fulfill it.

Still, having a great God is not all herring and cream sauce.
 We know the Hebrew phrase, “*B'A'A' Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam...--*
 Blessed are You *Adonai* our God, Ruler of the Universe...”
 Imagine for a moment that you are an ancient, or not so ancient, earthly king--
 The Pharaoh of Egypt, the Emperor of Rome, the Kaiser of Germany
 the Tsar of Russia, the President of Iraq, whomever.
 You see yourself, and for the most part your subjects see you,
 as great, mighty and exalted. Your word is Law.
 You may believe you were personally chosen to rule by the gods, or by God—
 that is, if you don't believe you are God yourself.
 You have absolute power and you demand absolute fealty.
 As a rule, with help from the army and the secret police, you get it.
 As Mel Brooks said, “It is good to be the King.”

There's only one fly in your royal ointment.
 There is a certain people in your realm, ostensibly your subjects,
 who are repeating, maybe 100 times a day,
 “*B'A'A' Eloheinu Melech Ha-Olam...translate*
 They are saying that there is a King of the world, a king of kings.
 And not only is this king not you, this King is greater than you.
 And if that weren't bad enough, this people say, you have to answer to Him.
 Unless the King in question was very wise, and unfortunately most were not,
 it would drive him crazy.
 What do you mean there is another king? Who is more important than me?
 How could that be?!

Btw, Jewish Kings of Israel and Judah weren't necessarily better with all this
 than non-Jewish kings—you can look it up.

Anyway yes, this was, and sometimes still is, a cause of anti-Semitism.
 You are not going to worship/honor/serve me above all others? I'll show you!
 And many of them did.

In spite of that, we persisted in fulfilling the demand to serve the highest.
 We pursued what was just and right and compassionate—
 because that is who we are. And if we have to pay a price to be true
 to our faith and our God, we do.
 So it has been a blessing to have a great and demanding God—
 though no one ever said it was easy.

And this points to another difference between our God and lesser gods.
 When our God tells us what to do—because we understand that
 our God is great—we listen, and when possible, follow.
 Even—and this is key—when we'd rather not.
 Here's the thing. If you serve a lesser god, you can ignore any demand
 that you consider inconvenient.
 Or, if it's a really lesser god, you get to tell it what to do.
 "Lesser god" of course is another word for idol.
 We create idols to serve us.
 And that's why people worship them
 We tell ourselves that they are there for us.
 Which, as anyone who ever made an idol out of a celebrity or sports star
 knows, it rarely works out that way.
 But people keep making them anyway.
 Because with idols we get to tell them what we want—
 instead of the other way around. How nice.

This brings us back to the *machzor*.
 In the *machzor* it sounds like we are doing something similar, doesn't it?
 We are trying to tell God what to do for us.
 Heal us, Comfort us, Deliver us, Save us, Forgive us, Grant us Peace...
 Hmm. How can this great Jewish text, the *machzor*,
 have us talking to our great God as if He were some lesser god?
 Who is doing the demanding here, us or Him?
 And we haven't even gotten to
 "You are just in all your ways, righteous in all your deeds."
 I told you this would be a bumpy flight.
 Houston we have a problem.
 And we need to solve it before the oxygen masks drop from the ceiling.

Over the millennia there have been multiple evolutions
 in Jewish belief and Jewish prayer.
 Many of our prayers are ancient.
 Maybe some of the authors understood, that for us to petition God
 was not only vain and fruitless, but borderline idolatrous as well.
 Maybe they understood that, but also understood that many people,
 in particular children and others who are young spiritually,
 relate best to that kind of God.
 Maybe some of them didn't understand any of that and
 it was simply what they believed.
 Whatever the reason or reasons, the prayers got in the book.

Yet while Jewish thought evolved over the generations,
 the *machzor*, at least the traditional *machzor*, pretty much stayed the same.
 In any event, whether they realized it or not, it is probably best for us
 to not take prayers like that literally.
 Rather we can understand them as the religious imagination at work--
 as poetry more than prose,
 as lyrical more than logical,
 as metaphor more than declaration,
 as heart longing more than head thinking.
 Does this help? I hope so.

Because at the end of the day,
 We may or may not believe in a God who will grant our requests
 just because we've been good and say pretty please.
 We may or may not believe in a God who will protect us,
 individually, as families, as a people, or as a human race.
 We may or may not believe that God, once upon a time,
 or many times upon a time, reached down from heaven and
changed the rules of nature or the outcome of history to benefit a chosen few.
 We may or may not believe that God executes perfect justice--
 in this world or the next.
 We may or may not believe that God is all powerful, merciful and
 loving.
 We may or may not believe any number of other traditional God beliefs that
 the *machzor*, the *siddur* and other Biblical texts present us with.
 We can say all this because we are *Yisrael*—the ones who wrestle with God.
 And we don't call ourselves that for nothing.

Because the contradictions and conundrums are so serious,
 some people, who prefer not to wrestle, turn away from God altogether.
 Believe me when I say I understand the temptation. But I don't recommend it.

Because turning away from God
 doesn't only turn us away from the contradictions,
 it also turns us away from the obligations, from the demands.
 And if we turn away from them, we are also turning away from the greatness—
 God's and ours.
 When we wrestle with God we will wrestle with great questions.
 And if great questions stymie us we are permitted to throw up our hands
 and walk away—at least for a while.
 But the same does not apply to the obligations.
 Jews are not permitted to walk away from those.

Whether we understand God's workings or not,
 or aren't sure if God exists altogether,
 or what kind of God God really is or isn't,
 we remain obligated to help make the world a better place.
 We remain obligated to execute justice where it is needed.

We remain obligated to treat every human being
 as if they are created in God's image no less than we are.
 We remain obligated to be faithful stewards of the earth.
 We remain obligated to maintain an inner life
 that helps move us in these directions.

Whether we believe that God commanded all this or not,
 we are obligated nonetheless. Because this is who we are.
 And on this day of days, we are also obligated to recognize
 that we have fallen short in carrying it out.
 Says who? That same *machzor*, God love it.

We understand too that words like "obligation" and "commandment"
 can sound burdensome, and that they run counter to the spirit of the age.
 Here the Bible and Talmud are illuminating.

They run counter to the spirit of every age.
 Nobody, in the whole history of the world,
 has ever enjoyed being told to do one thing
 when they would rather be doing something else.
 And no one, certainly no one over the age of ten,
 has ever appreciated being told that someone else
 knows what is better for us than we do.

We are arrogant. The *machzor* has that one nailed.
 And this day is given to us to understand that we are better off
 being that--not so much.

Judaism also gets it right that when we reach to fulfill those obligations,
 we receive blessing in return.
 We will talk more about that tomorrow.

But for tonight, let's recognize that for all of our wrestling,
 for all of the Gordian knots we can't unravel, for all of the pain,
 It is a blessing to serve the God who is there
 when we practice righteousness and compassion,
 when we live our lives in service to higher truths.

Who is there when our children are born and
 when we face tragedy or despair.

Who is with us when we reach the end of our days.
 Who is with us when we pray on Kol Nidre night,
 when we fast on YK day, and
 when we attempt to transform this time into holy moments.

Notice that we didn't say where God is, we said when God is.
 There's another Hebrew phrase we know, *l'olam va'ed*.

We usually translate it as "forever and ever."

But that is a bit inadequate.

Olam is the world. *Va'ed* is eternity.

L'olam va'ed means that God is with us both in the world—in space,
 and for eternity—in time.

In simple language, God is not only where. God is also when.
Sometimes it seems difficult if not impossible to know where God is.
But when we think about it, we can usually remember when God is.
If we can keep that in mind, our continuing journey might be a little less lonely
and a little more meaningful.

Okay, the captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt light.

Tonight's flight has reached its termination point.

Your local time is to fast and pray.

We have traveled from Community to God.

For those of you who are continuing with us towards Blessing,
please be here at the gate tomorrow morning at 9:30.

We know you have many choices when it comes to life journeying

But wherever your final destination may be,

Kol Nidre airlines invites you to travel with

the God who demands good things of you,

who is with you in joy, sorrow and ordinary time alike and

who, when served, will be the wind beneath your wings.

G'mar tov and I'shana tovah.