



High Holy Days 2019
Rabbi Jan Uhrbach

1st Day Rosh Hashanah
Dirshuni ViHiyu - Seek Me and Live

Amos came and distilled the whole Torah to one directive: כִּי כֹה אָמַר יי לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּרִשׁוּנִי וְחִיּוּ: "Thus says Adonai to the house of Israel: Seek Me and live." That's the animating principle driving all Jewish life and expression, and particularly teshuvah.

Before delving into what this might mean for us: I know God-language is hard for many of us. Sometimes it's a linguistic issue - "God" conjures an anthropomorphized figure who reaches down and does things, who has human emotions like love and anger, just the way we do -- I don't believe that either and it's not what I mean by God.

Without attempting to articulate my full theology in a systematic way, when I say God, I'm mostly referring to the Oneness of which all things (across both space and time) are an expression. One metaphor I find helpful is a wave in an ocean (which is identifiable as a separate wave with a sort of "life span," but which nevertheless always remains part of the ocean). Alternatively, I think of holding a prism up to light, revealing separate colors. Each of the colors is both separately visible and exists as part of the light. To say "God" is to allude to that which is both within and beyond each of us -- and the connective tissue in between all that is. Some people like the language "the heart of the world." Or you might think of the root system of aspen trees -- when you see a grove of aspen trees, it looks like many, many separate trees, but they're all offshoots of a single root system, part of a single organism.

Which isn't to say that I experience God as a philosophical idea -- that's too cold and disinterested for me. I love all the metaphoric language with which our Torah and liturgy refer to God -- God as loving, desiring, calling, judging, angry, jealous etc. -- because together they capture a sense of Presence, investment and relationship. The key is never to forget that they're metaphors, and not take them literally. Ultimately, for me God is an unname-able, mysterious striving animating all that is.

But "Seeking God" as the core mitzvah -- as essence of Judaism -- isn't really dependent on any particular belief in or about God. I daresay the most committed atheist could probably easily recite a list of things they're absolutely sure would be abhorrent to the God they don't believe in, as well as things that any God - if one existed - would value.

"Seeking God" is about an awareness of being part of and responsible to something larger than one's self, and actively seeking the connection with that larger whole. It's about the quest for what gives life meaning. Not in a value-neutral, morally-relativistic, way, but precisely through the responsibility that devolves upon us because we are part of something larger than ourselves. The quest to discern what the transcendent demands of us. In that sense "seeking God" is about striving to get beyond self-centeredness, to get out of self-referential and self-serving worldview -- to identify and recommit to essential values.

So what does this particular formulation of the essence of Torah/teshuvah -- Seek Me and live -- teach us?

I) The very fact of placing values at center of one's life. If there's one thing HH are about this year, it's this; everything flows from it, and it's not to be taken for granted.

Teshuvah is about our character. My definition of character is: having good values + the ability to remember them in the heat of emotion, and to act on them even when it comes at personal cost.

The first step is having good values - - being conscious of one's values, *choosing* them, committing to them. It's easy to be shaped by the environment and cultural norms, our own impulses and needs (or what we think of as our needs), our prior choices and values, what's tempting, what's comfortable.

Often we don't even know what we really value. One test, posited by Martha Nussbaum (a moral philosopher who writes about emotions and ethics) is to look really closely at what causes us to experience disgust, shame and righteous anger. Those three things reveal a lot about our true values.

Teshuvah then -- individually or collectively -- is the reorientation of one's life to regain centrality of core values. Or to use Rev William Barber's term, "moral revival." In large part, this is what we mean by crowning God as sovereign on Rosh Hashanah. *Malkhuyot* is about regaining our truth north.

II) Thus said Adonai to the House of Israel, "Dirshuni vi'hiyu" -- we are addressed as the collective "House of Israel," and in the plural forms of "seek Me" (*dirshuni*) and "live" (*vi'hiyu*). This teaches 2 things. First, that all is connected - the theology of oneness we talked about before.¹ And two, you can't seek God alone: Judaism is a team sport. It's too risky to do it alone, and metaphysically impossible. That means that paradoxically, you can't find God or your self except in relationship to others. What's essential - what gives life meaning - must be sought in connection with, and with concern for, others. If you spend your life pursuing the meaning of your life alone, without concern for other people, for society, you will waste your life.

I've seen several articles recently about the tensions between democracy and meritocracy -- meritocracy pushing us into competition with everyone for a limited, exclusive supply of something seen as good (often, exclusivity itself). This is the opposite. It's only when we understand our covenantal destiny as Jews and human beings -- we rise and fall together -- that we can begin to attain what's really valuable. Our yearning - whatever it's for -- isn't ours alone, and can't be satisfied alone.

1. Note also that this parallels the main meaning of the text as a whole: all the mitzvot are interconnected; like fractals, the part contains whole. The mitzvot are about seeking God, and seeking God is done through multiplicity of mitzvot and paths - 613 contained in 1, 1 expressed in 613 different ways.

III) The relationship between “Seek Me” and “you shall live.” Both are in the imperative (command) form. A variant version of this text (from Midrash Tanhuma) sees these as two separate mitzvot. But our version views them as a unified whole.

This works both ways. Pursuing God/meaning is the path to vitality. AND vitality -- investing in fullness of life, from birth to death -- is how we seek God. The more we risk living with full vitality -- embracing life with all of its joys and pains and messiness, feeling deeply -- the more we will sense God’s presence in our lives.

Seek Me and *live*. As we examine our values and desires, this is a good test of which ones are worthy: is it life-inducing, does it increase vitality? If what you’re pursuing isn’t life-affirming, whatever you’re seeking isn’t God, and isn’t good. A healthy theology and healthy values shouldn’t make you smaller and narrower; they should be expanding and growth inducing. And they should nurture your whole self -- your brain, your body, your emotions, your soul. If your values, or pursuing your desires, involves cutting off or ignoring some elemental part of yourself, something is wrong.

That doesn’t mean it’s easy, or always comfortable or pleasurable. Healthy theology, good values *also* demand discipline, and sometimes self-sacrifice, or bracketing self-interest -- extending one’s self -- for the sake of others. Because remember: “Seek Me and you shall live” is in the plural -- so it’s not just *my* vitality, but *our* vitality. If your values or theology lead you to see the world as a zero-sum game, in which in order for there to be winners there must be losers -- or if your well-being depends on oppression, suppression or exclusion of others -- something is wrong. As a practical matter, in very particular circumstances, competition may be necessary and scarcity a reality. But as a life position -- as a world view -- it’s distorted. If what you’re seeking is actually Me, God says, then you (collectively plural) will live; you will be supporting the interconnected vitality of the whole.

And by the way, if we really understood this, we wouldn’t be destroying our planet.

IV) Seek *Me*. Judaism demands constant questioning, and re-evaluation of what it is we really seek. Often we don’t really even know

One of my favorite moments in Torah is when Joseph has gone looking for his brothers and can’t find them. As he’s wandering, an unnamed man approaches and asks him, *Mah t’vakesh*, what do you seek? The Kotzker Rebbe (great Hasidic rabbi) said the angel was teaching Joseph to always ask himself that question, What do you seek? If Joseph had been seeking security he would’ve gone home. Instead he answered “I’m seeking my brothers” -- I’m seeking relationship, family, love, reconciliation. Which was a better answer, even though it meant descending into the pit to find them.

It’s a great question to ask one’s self, and to ask each other.

Many of us know the famous story (Shabbat 31a) of the man who came first to Shammai, then Hillel, asking to be taught entire Torah on one foot. The full story is less well known. It begins with a man who made a bet that he could provoke Hillel to anger. So he kept coming to him on Friday afternoon, yelling for him in the street and disrupting Hillel’s Shabbat preparation, only to ask some ridiculous question. A first-century troll. Every time, instead of getting angry, Hillel would greet the person with a question: *B’ni, mah atah m’vakesh* - “My child, what is that you are seeking?” Eventually it led to real conversation. The man revealed the bet, and Hillel cautioned him to watch his character, and be careful about anger.

What a great question to ask to or about someone who's stuck in complaining, or anger, or who wants to cause harm, or to humiliate another. What do you seek? There's a saying, when we're frightened or unsure, you can become furious, or curious. "Seek Me" suggests a posture of curiosity -- neither rejection nor disengagement, nor immediate acceptance -- but inquiry into self and other.

Because once we discover what we're seeking, we have to be willing to question -- in light of our tradition, are we seeking the right things, are our values right?

As I said last night, values -- like alleged facts -- can be wrong. What Martha Nussbaum calls "false social values." And at the same time, we sometimes have to question our tradition in light of the evolution of our values (That's the Talmudic context of our text -- a discussion of ways in which Judaism evolves.) Is our tradition, our theology even, in need of change? Has it become distorted by history, especially by trauma? Is it life-inducing and vital? That dance, is really the core challenge of the religious personality.

The Torah is very clear about some things that shouldn't be the central focus of our desire -- not because they're inherently bad, but because they're not what life is about, not worthy: power, money, pleasure. Or, comfort and security. Note that in the Isaiah passage and Psalm 15, security and comfort are a by-product, not the goal -- they're the result of seeking worthy things.

What are the things you spend your time and energy -- your life -- seeking? Do your values/desires need tweaking? Radical revisioning? One of my favorite hasidic tales² tells that one time Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz entered the House of Study, and all his disciples, who had been in animated conversation, stopped talking when he came in. So he asked them, "What were you talking about?" "Rabbi," they said, "we were saying how afraid we are that the Evil Urge will pursue us." "Don't worry," he replied. "You have not gotten high enough for it to pursue you. For the time being, you are still pursuing it."

So, so far, "Seek Me and live" tells us that Judaism is about:

- 1) Put your values at the center
- 2) Live in the plural
- 3) Be life-affirming, and
- 4) Pursue worthy, good things.

Now we turn to the last lesson:

V) *Dirshuni* - seek. The essence of Torah, of Judaism is *lidrosh* - to ask, demand, question, probe, pursue. To be a Jew is to be a seeker

"Seeking" is ACTIVE. Every list of mitzvot in our text (11, 6, 3, 2) employs active language, whether the language of acting (*po'el*), or "doing/making" (*l'oseh* - twice), or 3 references to walking (*holekh*).

Walking. Walking is not incidental or occasional, but how you move through life. The word *halakhah* is from that root. It's a path, a way; not a static, rigid collection of law, but a lived

2. Martin Buber, Tales of the Hasidim, p. 132.

tradition. This is not a spirituality of dwelling, but of walking, moving, embodying -- not about abstract principles, but operative principles, a real vital force in your life. Contemplative practice can be an important part of it, but not as an end in itself. And walking in the sense of forward motion. Angels are static, human beings grow.

To be a seeker is a humble stance. To be a seeker of **God** demands humility on steroids. If I already know everything, I've arrived, I've got a lock on what God wants, I'm not seeking, and whatever I think I've found isn't God.

When I say that "Seek Me and live" means center your life around ultimate values, that doesn't mean the path is clear. Our text doesn't present a fixed hierarchy of values; rather, it's a search for essence, that which animates and informs all the detail. And no single value is absolute, but always lived in tension with other values. So even if I think I've got my core values straight, what do they demand of me now? What if they conflict? How should they be balanced? Weighted?

There's no answer to that once and for all, and sometimes we get it wrong. That's the complexity of teshuvah; it's a process of discernment, which demands humility

To be a seeker -- and especially a seeker of God -- means living in an aspirational mode, tolerating the gap between what is and what we can imagine ought to be. It means living with desire and yearning, often for something we can't even quite name.

» כִּי כֹה אָמַר -- "For thus said Adonai... Seek Me." We are addressed -- some One, some thing is saying, Seek Me. Who? Well, that's what we're seeking. Think about the paradox of that. Yearning is built into our being. To be human is to be possessed of a longing that we sense but don't understand -- that is evoked, drawn forth, by something both within us and beyond us, which itself, we sense and don't understand. Some of us call that God. As the psalmist says (Psalm 42) תִּתְהַוֶּה אֶל-תְּהוֹמוֹת קוֹרָא, deep calls to deep.

So we live in a conundrum. Without yearning, longing, we're beyond bored -- we're sort of dead; yearning is intertwined with human vitality. But unresolved yearning, when we don't even know what we really seek, is very hard to bear. It takes strength and courage.

And that's where we often get tripped up. We try to get out of the conundrum by denying the yearning, or by substituting other desires, that are easier to fulfill. Or we experience the discomfort as frustrated entitlement, and become furious instead of curious. And that's when we're likely to cause a lot of harm to other people. We become rapacious, greedy -- not just for money & stuff but for approval, recognition, power, status, attention. We chase and chase and chase and we're never fulfilled.

Here's another of my favorite ḥasidic tales:³

The Evil Inclination is like one who runs about the world keeping his hand closed. Nobody knows what he has inside of it. He goes up to everyone and asks: "What do you suppose I have in my hand?" And every person thinks that just what he or she wants most of all is hidden there. And everyone runs after the Evil Inclination. Then he opens his hand, and it is empty.

3. Martin Buber, *Ten Rungs* p. 94

A beautiful liturgy crafted by Catherine Madsen expresses it poetically:⁴

QUINTESENCE: In the darkness, before anything was, nothing longed to become something; and from that longing came matter out of spirit, life from the inert, history from the unremembered, and the finite from the infinite. All that is imaginable began to be imagined. Who can tell if that longing was fulfilled? -- whether the world that appeared was the world that was longed for? ...

ALL: *But this we understand: we are not free of that longing. We want to bring the world into being....*

Maybe her poetry calls to mind for you

- a picture of a commanding God saying “Seek Me,”
- or a longing at the heart of creation that we sense and are part of, that calls us,
- or a voice within yourself which *utzes* you, yearns for something more.

It doesn't matter. The point is to pay attention to *that* voice, *that* yearning. Because it's attentiveness, responsiveness to *that* yearning, that makes life meaningful, that enables us to become fully who we are. It's stuff of our very humanity.

כי כה אָמַר יי לְבֵית יִשְׂרָאֵל דְּרִשׁוּנִי וְחַיֵּי:

4. Catherine Madsen, *In Medias Res* (page 73)