

Response to Love: Serving God with Our Whole Being

My children's car seats are just close enough that they can reach out and touch each other's hands. This becomes really important when Esther, our one-and-a-half-year-old daughter, starts to cry. Her seat faces the rear, and her brother's the only one who can really see her. So when Jeremiah hears his sister crying, he often takes responsibility for consoling her.

He'll tell her: "I'm here, Esther. It's okay. I'm here."

His message is simple:

I love you,
I'm close to you,
and it's going to be okay.

Sometimes there's nothing more comforting than someone you love saying, "I'm here."

/

And though it may be difficult for us to hear, this is exactly what God says to every one of us.

אֶהְבֶּתִי אֶתְכֶם אָמַר יי

"I love you, says the Eternal One" (Malachi 1:2).

"I love you with an everlasting love; and I will always remain true to you" (Jeremiah 31:2).¹

"Because you are precious in My sight, My presence is with you, and I love you. ... Be not afraid, for I am with you" (Isaiah 43:4-5).²

God loves us.
God is close to us.
And with God, it's going to be okay.

¹ ואהבת עולם אהבתיה, על פן משקתיה חסד.

² מאשר יקרת בעיני נכבדת, ואני אהבתיה ... אל תירא פי אתה אני, reading נכבדת as "My presence is with you."

/

We don't know for sure who or what God is. No one ever has.

And though many of us struggle with the very concept of God, though many of us proclaim ourselves to be atheists, we may nevertheless listen with humility in our personal quests for truth to the wisdom of our tradition, a tradition which insists that we are part of something larger than ourselves, that there *is* goodness and something that *makes* goodness,³ that somehow and for some purpose, life erupted in this dynamic universe and has given rise to art and philosophy, religion and society, individuality and relationship.

We are Israel, *יִשְׂרָאֵל*; our very name means "One who struggles with God." And through the struggle, despite the struggle, because of the struggle, one eternal truth remains constant.

God loves you.
God is close to you.
And it's going to be okay.

/

We see testament to God's love for us fully on display in a midrash⁴ – an interpretive story – about our people's darkest chapter, our mythic oppression and slavery in the narrow place called Egypt.

In his attempt to commit genocide against our people, Pharaoh ordered that all newborn Hebrew children be put to death. The women of Israel therefore went out to the fields to give birth in secret. For each birth, God would personally descend from heaven to serve as the mother's midwife.⁵ Fearing for their own lives, the mothers would return to their homes, leaving their newborn children in the wild. So God supplied breasts, one filled with oil and the other with honey, for the infants to suckle. When Egyptian soldiers would patrol nearby, God would hide the children inside the earth, bringing them forth again like sprouting grass when the danger had passed. God protected and nurtured and raised those children as their own mother until they were old enough to return home.

³ הטוב והמטיב

⁴ Shemot Rabbah 1:12 and BT Sotah 11b.

⁵ The midrash says והקב"ה שולח מלאך משמי מרום, "And the Holy Blessed One sent an angel from the highest heavens." However, the prooftext is Ezekiel 6:4, and in that context (cf. verse 6), it is clear that God Godself is present during these births. In any event, such an angel cannot be separated from God, as angels in Jewish tradition frequently stand in for God's own self.

Later, when the moment of liberation finally came, the People of Israel stood on the far shore of the Sea of Reeds, and God chose to reveal Godself to them. The older generation did not recognize the One who had freed them from slavery, whom they had never seen before. But the children whom God had personally raised from infancy recognized her instantly, crying זֶה אֱלֹהֵי, “This is my God!” (Ex. 15:2), the One who cared for me in the wilderness.

The truth imbedded in this story is the truth of our own lives. God is our nursemaid and our guardian, the parent we need when we are bound in slavery. Her love for us is as deep – deeper, even⁶ – than a human mother’s love for her own child.

/

But God is not only our mother, our father. Today, Rosh Hashanah, is God’s coronation day,⁷ the day we reaffirm that God is our King, whom alone we serve in reverence.

God is *Avinu*, our parent, and God is *Malkeinu*, our sovereign. And as both parent **and** ruler, God is king unlike any mortal king the world has ever known.

So we read in the Talmud: The earthly custom is for a king to dwell at the center of his palace and to be surrounded by his servants who keep guard on him from without. But in the case of the Holy One, the servants dwell within while God protects them from outside.⁸

God as king is not a commander but a protector. God does not demand our service for some sense of self-gratification. Rather, the service of God is for us, for our own individual benefit and for the welfare of our society.

In Judaism, “service to God” does not mean blind submission. It is not drudgery or encumbrance or a surrender of our individual freedom. Rather, we are taught: עֲבֹדוּ אֶת יְיָ בְּשִׂמְחָה; בָּאוּ לְפָנָיו בְּרִנְנָה, “Serve the Eternal with gladness, Come before God’s presence with singing” (Ps. 100:2).

Service to God is a joy, a noble endeavor that makes us better and helps us make the world a better place.

/

⁶ Cf. Isaiah 49:15.

⁷ וּבְכֹן נִמְלִיכָה מֶלֶךְ עֲלֵינוּ in Rosh Hashanah Musaf (see [here](#)).

⁸ BT Avodah Zarah 11a.

Inspired by the love of God and suffused with the festive spirit of pursuing life's highest goals, we embrace the service of God with every fiber of our being.

This is the lesson of Reb Boruch of Medzhibozh, the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, the first Chasidic rebbe. He used to teach:

During the High Holy Days
we serve God with our whole being:

on Rosh Hashanah, with the brain
since memory enwreathes the mind;

on Yom Kippur, with the heart,
since repentance strains the spirit;

on Sukkot, with the hands,
as we grasp the etrog and lulav;

and on Simchat Torah, with the feet,
when we parade and dance with the Torah.⁹

Our brains, our hearts, our hands, our feet. These represent our intellect and our passion, and our deeds both intimate and public. Every part of our body symbolizes some aspect of divine service, and taken together, they form a holistic approach to making Judaism real in our lives.

/

Reb Boruch begins with the brain.

This is no coincidence since the fuel of our tradition has, from its earliest days, been curiosity and creativity. The essential project of Judaism is and always has been the human interpretation of holy texts in order to make them relevant in the current time. That's why the ancient sage Rava, one of the most prominent figures of the Talmud, taught, "How foolish are people who rise in the presence of a Torah **scroll** but who do not rise in the presence of a Torah **scholar**."¹⁰

Questioning the Torah is perhaps the most sacred act of Judaism, and serving God with our brains means marshaling our finest thoughts and arguments in respectful dialogue with our tradition. We engage with our sacred texts, bringing our full sophistication to bear upon them, to discover within them eternal truths that enrich our lives.

⁹ *The Sukkot and Simhat Torah Anthology* by Philip Goodman, p. 92

¹⁰ אמר רבא: כמה טפשי שאר אינשי דקיימי מקמי ספר תורה ולא קיימי מקמי גברא רבה. BT Makkot 22b.

/

But were we to focus only on our brains, we would find no compelling reason to follow the mitzvot or to be Jewish at all. The Rabbis are explicit about this: Much of the Torah defies logic or rationale. One cannot reason one's way into Jewish life.

That is why we also serve God with our hearts.

Like a family member or a dear friend, Jewishness is essential to who we are. We may go months or years without being in touch, but the relationship is always there, with its potential for blossoming anew at any moment.

There are aspects of being Jewish we cannot imagine life without. A holiday tradition, a family history, a turn of phrase, or a cherished artifact. Hebrew School. Conversion. Ritual and prayer and stories and songs.

Sometimes we feel affection for these elements of Jewish life, and sometimes they cause us frustration, alienation, or fear. We may not *like* everything about being Jewish, but our relationship to our heritage entails far more than basic affection. Rather, our love grows out of commitment and connection, rooting us to our tradition and nourishing us through its presence in our lives.

/

If the brain and the heart represent our internal processes of service to God, then our hands and our feet symbolize the outward actions we take.

We recite on these High Holy Days:

וּבְשׁוֹפָר גָּדוֹל יִתְקַע

וְקוֹל דְּמַמָּה דְקָה יִשְׁמַע

The great shofar is sounded;

*and the still, small voice is heard.*¹¹

Serving God with our hands is heeding the still, small voice, the conscience that guides each of us to embrace ourselves and others with kindness and humility.

To serve with the hands, Reb Boruch reminds us, is a practice of intimacy. On the holiday of Sukkot, the most visceral of the High Holy Days, we physically grasp the lulav and etrog, the ritual objects we use to remind us of God's presence. It is a holiday of drawing near, of bringing our personal space into holy contact with others.

¹¹ Unetaneh Tokef.

We serve God with our hands when we bring sacred intention into the quiet parts of our lives. When we tenderly take on the role of teacher, parent, lover, friend. When we do our work honestly, clean and organize our spaces, or volunteer to help someone in need. When we meditate, read, write, consider, sing, pray, exercise, and eat. All of these small, intimate moments – and countless others beside – are opportunities to serve God close-up.

/

And if serving God with our hands is about intimacy and tranquility, then serving God with our feet is about publicity and demonstration. It's about stepping out of the private realm and into the public sphere to proclaim to our neighbors and to the world at large the convictions we care most about and to dedicate ourselves to advancing and defending them.

Reb Boruch gives the example of dancing with the Torah scrolls during the holiday of Simchat Torah, a singularly public act of celebration that literally carries the words of our tradition out into the world. To serve God with our feet means to bring Torah out of the synagogue, to uphold and promote its values and to stand by our tradition proudly and resolutely.

We find this kind of service in advocating for public policies that accord with our values, in volunteering to take leadership roles in projects we believe in, and in using our talents and passions to support causes we trust will make the world a better place.

It can be difficult and unpopular to speak openly about our beliefs. That is why God encourages us, “You must be very strong and resolute to observe [the Torah]” (Joshua 1:7). But when we insist that our moral principles are integral to our citizenship, when we bring our convictions into the public square, we join the political and spiritual activists who have promoted and defended Judaism’s highest ideals both in ancient history and in the contemporary age. In standing up for what we believe in, we can pray with our legs¹² and serve God with our feet.

/

Reb Boruch of Medzhibozh has given us an anatomy of virtuous Jewish life.

We serve God with our brains, signifying our intellectual engagement with tradition.

¹² When Abraham Joshua Heschel returned home from marching with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma, AL in 1965, he wrote, “For many of us the march from Selma to Montgomery was about protest and prayer. Legs are not lips and walking is not kneeling. And yet our legs uttered songs. Even without words, our march was worship. **I felt my legs were praying.**” See Susannah Heschel’s “Following in my father’s footsteps: Selma 40 years later” (Vox of Dartmouth, April 2005), available online [here](#).

We serve God with our hearts, symbolizing the love and passion that we feel for our tradition and for one another.

We serve God with our hands in the private, quiet acts of devotion that bring sacredness into the world.

And we serve God with our feet, representing the public statements and demonstrations that announce and establish our principles in society.

/

As the New Year begins, let us commit to renewing our service to the Most High.

We may be better at one or another of these different modes of serving God, and each of them may at times challenge us. Our resolution this year can be to find the space where we can most fruitfully grow, to root ourselves in our values and stretch ourselves to new heights.

It will be difficult, but we don't have to do it alone. God says to us:

Fear not; for I am with you;
be not dismayed; for I am your God;
I will strengthen you;
yes, I will help you;
yes, I will uphold you
with the right hand of my righteousness (Isa. 41:10).¹³

Let one message of comfort and inspiration be with us throughout these High Holy Days and the months and years to follow:

God loves you.
God is close to you.
And with God it's going to be okay.

¹³ אל תירא פי עמך אני אל תשמת פי אני אלהיך; אמצתיך אף עזרתיך אף תמקתיך בימין צדקי