

## Rabbi Brad Bloom

### Yom Kippur Evening Sermon - 2013

This evening I want to talk about the fear of God. What if anything does that expression mean today? Is this ancient notion of fearing God an outdated belief that should be relegated to a genizah or a warehouse of retired ideas, to be studied by historians but no longer relevant in today's thinking about God? Have we indeed rejected a God that no longer has the capacity to sling a lightning bolt or two our way? Or maybe it was never that simple, and maybe we simply refuse to open up to other traditional ideas that we might, even today, consider inspiring. Given the fact that my rabbinical association, the CCAR, will be producing a new mahzor for the Reform movement in 2015, we will get to see very soon just how the Reform rabbinate comes down on traditional beliefs versus contemporary ideas as it attempts to rewrite the theology of our prayerbook and, therefore, alter the future of Reform Judaism.

When I think about the fear of God, I relate to the feeling of not actually being scared for my life but the feeling of being lonely and far away from God, as if I am totally disconnected to anything that draws me into the presence of the Divine. There is a story about the Rabbi of Kotzk in which his students ask him, "Rabbi, when the people stood at Mount Sinai, why did they say to Moses: "Only you may speak the words of God to us, and we will hear (God's word); but let not God speak directly with us lest we die!" In that moment, when Moses reassured the people, why did he say, "Fear not?"

And then, the Kotzker's students continued, "When God came and spoke directly to the people anyway, despite Moses' original promise, why did Moses insist that God had appeared to the people by saying to them so that 'His fear may be before you that you sin not.' Is that not a contradiction?" In other words, how can Moses first tell the people "Fear not as if they will not have to face God, and then in the same breath say, God's fear will be upon you?" Which is it? Don't be afraid of God speaking directly to the people? Or be afraid?

Another Rabbi hearing this discourse from the Rabbi exclaimed, "'Fear not' –that really means: this fear of yours, the fear of death, is not the fear God wants of you. Instead God wants you to understand the fear of God in the sense of fearing his remoteness from you, so that you will not fall into sin, which removes you from being close to the presence of God."

Now, we live in a very different world from that of the Rabbi of Kotzk, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century Hasidic master in Eastern Europe, and that of his followers; much of the modern world now scoffs at the notion that humans should literally fear God. Many rabbis and congregants will attest that the old belief in Yirat Shamayim, fear of heaven or fear of God, simply does not resonate with contemporary worshippers. In fact, the Reform mahzor, a generation ago, did everything it could to distance itself from the belief that we should literally fear God, that is, the belief that God has the power to intervene in our lives and create adverse consequences should we commit transgressions. To demonstrate their discomfort with this notion, an earlier generation of Rabbis chose softer language when they named the mahzor "Days of Awe." Their thought was that somehow the term "awe" connoted a much less austere and intimidating relationship between humans and God. For me, the word "awe" connotes a feeling of

wonderment, the sensation I get when I behold a painting or a beautiful landscape as compared to standing naked and trembling with humility before the Eternal One.

Many have told me that when they were young they did not connect to the idea of God much at all, unless, perhaps, they grew up in strictly observant homes. Some of us who served in the military, and especially in combat, or who have had traumatic experiences, may have had cause to think about a God who judges us and who determines our fate, but most do not. The words of the U'netane Tokef prayer, for example, "Who shall live and Who shall die" are moving and dramatic enough, but not necessarily relevant to everyone, even if they did resonate for those who have seen the angel of death at work.

I have also learned, on the other hand, that after the majority of our years are behind us, many times the idea of God begins to be of greater relevance to our lives. We have lost loved ones, suffered other kinds of traumas, health issues and, frankly, facing our own mortality, we may be more introspective today about whether and how God cares about us, or whether we even have a need to feel less remote from God, as compared to when we were young.

The larger problem with liberal religion today, as I see it, is that we have grown remote from a personal relationship with God. Is that because we are engaged in so many other endeavors that we take our minds off the big questions of why we are here and what our purpose may be in this life? Is it any surprise, then, that in our distracted state we have become distant from prayer and from believing in a God who actually cares about how we live our lives?

Or is it because we have put our faith in the incredible achievements of contemporary science and the materialist world-view that it has spawned? Yet, have we not also witnessed the terrible limitations of *that* faith as well? Not only did Western science not prevent Auschwitz, but many would argue the technology of genocide was possible only because that technology existed. It is hardly surprising, then, that the horrors of the Holocaust have made it impossible for some to even think of a just God, let alone consider praying to this kind of a deity. And while, admittedly, the secular culture we live in has given us unparalleled freedoms and advancements in science, which clearly have contributed to a better world, we really have to ask whether such freedoms and achievements have come at a terrible price, by hollowing-out our heritage to the point where many non-practicing Jews have forgotten what it means to stand humbly before the Creator of the Universe?

As I mentioned a moment ago, the reform rabbinate is working arduously on a new High Holy Day mahzor, and in fact, our congregation has volunteered to pilot some of the services. I have noticed that in the desire to be relevant and contemporary with modern worshippers, the trend today is to avoid prayer language that depicts us in a hierarchical relationship with God. While I respect and embrace gender-neutral language, and while I can see why that new idiom is often tied together with an effort to rid our prayer language of a hierarchical theology, yet, I still fear we may be giving up something precious in order to be current in the popular culture. Are we headed down a road where God will appear more like the ultimate therapist and the High Holy Days will look like a cultural festival or a smorgasbord devoid of questions that comfort the afflicted souls and afflict the comfortable?

I cannot explain what God is nor can I explain all the inconsistencies between what a supposedly all powerful or all encompassing God represents to us versus what our experience says God is about. I am not coming before you tonight as either a philosopher or a theologian. I am a rabbi who takes a leap of faith every time I pray, with all my questions about God, and who yet still yearns to reach out and to feel close to a divine presence, even when it is uncomfortable and unknowable. I suppose thirty years have somehow taught me how to live in the “gray zone” of God talk.

Soon enough the new mahzor will arrive, and I suspect that sympathetic reviewers around the world will herald its strengths and downplay its problematic assumptions. We will purchase them for the congregation because we want to be current with the movement. We will surely want to embrace some of its welcome innovations, like gender-free English translations of the word Adonai and other references to Patriarchs and Matriarchs as well as creating an all inclusive lens to address, pray to and petition God. But at the end of the day what makes people religious is not necessarily a prayerbook. Even though the book may have many beautiful prayers, religious commitment and faith flow from experiences outside of a mahzor or a siddur. A prayerbook may help us verbalize our need to seek out a closer relationship with God, but can we realistically expect that any prayerbook in itself is going to transform us spiritually, banish our doubts, or finally, draw us closer to the spiritual core of Judaism?

Liberal Judaism’s problem, as I understand it, is that it risks selling off its soul to the current themes of popular culture, even with the best of intentions, as it tries to stay relevant to its membership. In contrast to the more extreme elements of traditional Judaism – where a kind of spiritual stagnation has taken hold, suppressing the value of the individual, ignoring issues of social justice or gender equality, or simply rejecting the possibility that religion can evolve to meet contemporary needs – Reform Judaism has always believed in the value of change, in thought as well as religious practice. Still, even in Reform Judaism, a respect for tradition also exists, and though we don’t sit shaking in fear of God, does that mean that we should shut ourselves off from the belief that God judges our actions and can offer atonement? Are we to resign ourselves, therefore, to living in a state of remoteness from God?

A high holy day mahzor or shabbat siddur is like a compass that points us in a direction and records where we have been as well as where we are headed in our spiritual lives. Of course, believing or not believing in God, or affiliating with a temple or not affiliating with it are not decisions that one bases on one’s reading of a prayerbook. Religion is a communal experience and it is also a very personal one too. If I visit a therapist, for example, and tell that person about certain actions that I committed which were morally wrong, I don’t expect the therapist to pass judgment over me or my actions. I expect therapists to assist me in coping with the emotions that I feel and possibly guide me on how best I can address them. Their role is one devoted to my mental health. If I visit a rabbi, I may expect the rabbi to share the teachings of Judaism in relation to the acts I have committed and help me to find a way through my religion to find a resolution. The rabbi’s role is one devoted to my moral and spiritual health. Yet at the end of the day, there are issues that a person alone cannot address with another, and it requires reaching out to God for support. It is at that moment that we have engaged God, acknowledged the divine role as judge and arbiter of our moral and spiritual lives, and that is a role that no human being can fulfill. I am not sure one can achieve that kind of relationship, especially on Yom Kippur, without some kind of hierarchy of relationship between us and God.

I believe that in every soul there is a secret prayer inside. And any prayerbook or rabbi or cantor who can help a person find that prayer, regardless of the mahzor, I will use it and I will listen to the words of the rabbi and I shall sing with the Cantor. Rabbi Uri, a sage of about 200 years ago in Eastern Europe expounded the words of the prayer, "May the One who knows that which is hidden accept our call for help and listen to our cry."

He continued, "We know very well how we would like to pray; and still we cry for help in the need of the moment. The soul wishes us to cry out in spiritual need, but we are not able to express what the soul means. And so we pray that God may accept our call for help, but also that God, who knows that which is hidden, may hear the silent cry of the soul."

Maybe the Fear of God occurs at that moment when we cannot articulate what we mean or even need, but believe only God can see inside us what is hidden and what needs to be revealed. It is the awareness of not knowing where we are spiritually, the feeling of disconnect, the remoteness from the Holy One that triggers yirat shamayim or the fear of God. This is the powerful insight I do not want to give up because it is the only way a person can find their way back to an emotional connection to their faith.

Fear of god is not simply an emotion. It is a spiritual instinct. The rabbi of Kotz asked one of his students:

"Have you ever seen a wolf?"

"Yes," he replied.

"And were you afraid of him?"

"Yes."

"But, were you aware of the fact that you were afraid?"

"No," answered the Hasid. "I was simply afraid."

"That is how it should be with us when we fear God," said the Rabbi.

And this is my problem with liberal Judaism and its way towards confusing theology with prayer. They are two different categories of experience, and I am praying that my distinguished colleagues don't create a High Holy Day mahzor that is good theology but a poor prayerbook experience.

Has the idea of the Fear of God become a casualty of a modern mindset that suppresses the inner recesses of the soul, a mindset that portrays God as the therapist and not the Holy One, a mindset that tells us that if God cannot be quantified into a scientific construct then that God is meaningless? If so, then is it no wonder that we shy away from the God of faith in any real life relationship and seek more benign versions of comfort that make appearances feel acceptable.

I am searching for the God who can see into me better than I can see in myself. I am looking for a God that as a Rabbi I can teach you about that is not another person but who represents a Presence In our lives and in our historic consciousness.

I am looking for the God who can touch the secret prayer inside me and in you, the prayer we ourselves cannot articulate, but that dwells deep inside us. That place, I believe, is the beginning of religious insight and faith.