

YOM KIPPUR DAY 2025

“Wherever We Let God In”

There are mornings when the first light breaks over the horizon, painting the sky with soft color, and it feels as if the world itself is breathing with us. The trees sway gently in the breeze, a bird calls at dawn, dew glistens on the grass — in such moments, sensing God comes easily. Creation sings, and we know we are part of it. But there are other mornings when the news is loud, or grief is louder, and the question that rises is as old as Torah itself: Where is God now?

At the bush that burned and was not consumed, when Moses asked for God’s name, God replied in Hebrew, Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh (Exodus 3:14). More often than not, this is translated as “I AM THAT I AM,” but the Hebrew is written in the future tense: “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE.” In other words, God says to Moses — and to each of us — “I will be whatever you need Me to be in a particular moment in time.”

That is why Torah and our prayer book are filled with so many names for God. God is Elohim, Creator of the universe, the One who spoke light into being. God is El Shaddai, the nurturing One who sustains life. God is Adonai, the Master before whom we bow in awe. God is also El Elyon, the Most High, and Tzur Yisrael, the Rock of Israel. Our tradition calls God Shechinah, the Presence who dwells with us even in exile, reminding us that the Holy is not far away but near. Each of these names reveals a different face of the same truth.

These names give us a glimpse into God's nature. Our people have never settled for a single metaphor. What they share is a way of experiencing God as near and purposeful: a Presence that breathes possibility into the world and into us, a Source who summons us to live with courage, justice, and love.

And our tradition insists that God does not live only in sanctuaries. When God says, "Let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them," the Hebrew can be read literally as "within them." Holiness is not a place we visit; it is a life we build, a readiness to make room for the Divine within and between us. Our Reform tradition reminds us that the Tabernacle was never meant to contain God, as though the Holy One could be locked away in poles and curtains. Its purpose was to form a people who would carry God wherever they went. That truth became unmistakable when the Temple was destroyed and Jews were scattered across the earth. Holiness was not left behind in Jerusalem. When Rome marched triumphantly with the golden menorah, they thought they had seized Israel's God. But the real treasure was not what could be carried off in spoils. The real treasure was Torah itself — portable, memorizable, translatable, able to be studied in any land and lived in any language. God cannot be contained in stone or gold. God dwells among the people.

A Hasidic master was once asked, "Where does God dwell?" and answered, "Wherever we let God in." A sentence that sounds simple until you try to live it. Letting God in is not mystical escape; it is moral availability. It is the pause before we speak in anger, when we choose restraint. It is the moment when we see a need and move from sympathy to service. It is the decision to show up for one another,

again and again, even when no one is watching. Rabbis have passed down this saying for generations because it names something deeply true: the doorway of the heart is where holiness steps into the world.

And yet, many of us long for God to do more than accompany — to intervene, to fix, to hand us what we lack: peace, fearlessness, love, joy. Which reminds me of a story.

A woman dreamed she walked into a beautiful new shop in her town. “May I help you?” asked a gentle voice from behind the counter. She turned — and was astonished to see God standing there. Startled, she whispered, “Oh yes... I’m searching for something.” “In this store, we have everything you need,” God replied. The woman thought carefully and said, “I would like peace of mind, freedom from fear, enduring love, and true joy.” God’s smile widened. “My child, you do not yet understand. Here we only have seeds.”

That is not a retreat from responsibility; it is a revelation of God’s very nature. Like a loving parent or a wise teacher, God does not complete the work for us but places tools in our hands, materials before us, and trust within us. Seeds call for patience and care, for faith that the planting matters. Our tradition teaches that holiness is not found in reaching perfection but in walking faithfully in partnership — God’s Presence and our hands together shaping the world. To plant a garden is to believe in the future. So it is with our covenant with God. Each act of kindness, each word of justice, each gesture of love is faith that the future will hold more wholeness because we were willing to begin.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks taught that optimism is the belief that the world will get better, but hope is the belief that, together, we can make the world better. Optimism is a mood; hope is a responsibility. And hope, he said, takes courage. Jewish life has always been sustained by hope — not a passive hope that waits for things to improve, but an active hope that partners with God to bring about change. When we speak of Judaism as a “literature of hope,” we mean that our texts, our prayers, our rituals, and our stories are all rooted in the conviction that the world is not finished and that human beings are called to help complete it.

Jewish hope is the conviction, born from Torah and centuries of lived history, that the world is unfinished and that we are called to join God in its repair. It does not depend on guarantees of success. It does not rest on seeing the end result. Instead, it trusts that every act of justice, every gesture of compassion, every small repair, matters — not only in itself, but as part of a greater wholeness that we may never see.

That’s why Rabbi Hillel’s words in Pirkei Avot resonate so strongly: “It is not upon you to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.” Jewish hope is not the certainty that we will finish the task, but the faith that each small act of repair contributes to the whole.

God’s presence not only fills us with moments of potential and optimism, but is also present in our most fragile hours. The Psalms testify with unflinching honesty: “Weeping may endure for the night, but joy comes in the morning.” Night is real, sorrow is real, yet dawn will come. Isaiah lifts the same truth in another voice: “Do

not fear, for I am with you.” These words were spoken to exiles who had lost nearly everything. The prophet does not deny their pain; he places God within it, promising that the Holy One is present.

God’s love is not a reward for what we accomplish, nor a prize for those who succeed. It is simply there, like the sunrise. It comes without our earning it, and it shines even when clouds obscure our view. Jewish tradition teaches that this does not mean God orchestrates every detail of our lives. Our sages did not picture God as a puppeteer pulling strings or a judge sending down afflictions. Instead, they pointed us back to the promise spoken at the burning bush: Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh — “I will be what I will be.” God is not fixed in one form or role, but a Presence that can be experienced in many ways — as Rock, as Parent, as Comforter, as Friend. At every moment in time, God is the One who becomes what we most need: strength in weakness, courage in fear, light in darkness.

So where does this leave us in everyday life? It leaves us looking for God precisely where we stand — in the places where HaKadosh Baruch Hu, the Holy One, fills our soul.

One of the clearest expressions of this truth comes in God’s charge to Joshua. Moses had died, the wilderness wandering was over, and the people stood trembling at the edge of the Promised Land. Joshua was suddenly the one called to lead them forward, though he had none of Moses’ stature and all of the people’s uncertainty. Into that moment of fear, God spoke: “Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the Eternal your God is with you wherever you go.”

These are not words meant to erase fear, but to steady it. They are words for anyone who stands at the edge of the unknown. God does not promise Joshua ease; God promises presence. And that is the heart of Jewish faith: that we need not face the future unafraid, only that we remember the Holy One walks with us into it. This assurance gave Joshua courage to lead and gave the people courage to follow — and it gives us courage, too, to step into a new year with hope.

So if you ask, “Where is God in a divided world, in a fearful season?” — the answer our tradition gives is practical and brave: God is wherever we let God in. God is in the call you choose to return, the apology you finally make, the voice you raise for someone who has been silenced, the funds you set aside for those who cannot repay you, the time you carve out to learn and to listen. God is in the refusal to surrender to cynicism because hope is holier. God is in your next faithful step.

And when fear arrives — because it will — remember that we are not the first to face it. Isaiah’s words were spoken to a people already wounded: “Do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God.” Those lines do not promise ease; they promise accompaniment and strength. They tell us that God’s with-ness is not sentimental comfort but real power: “I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you.” Let the verse be what it is — a pledge given in exile — and let it do for us what it did for them: steady the heart and set the feet moving again.

One more turn of the jewel. Hope is not naïveté; it is a discipline we can practice. It is blessing bread before we eat, because gratitude keeps the world honest. It is lighting candles in the dark and saying out loud that light still belongs here. It is

studying words older than our grief, so we remember that we come from survivors. It is the stubborn, joyful insistence that acts of repair — tikkun — matter, that lifting even one spark lifts the whole, that doing one just thing is never nothing. This is how Jews live with God.

So let this be our charge. Let God in. Make room with your time, your attention, your resources, your courage. Look for the next right thing, and do it. If you are waiting for proof that God is near, offer it to someone else — and watch how the offering becomes proof for you, too. If you are waiting for fruit, plant a seed. If you are waiting for a sign, become one. If you are waiting for morning, light a candle where you are, and be the first thin line of dawn for a neighbor.

And now, as the gates of Yom Kippur begin to close, let us carry forward what we have found here: the courage to let God in, the hope to keep planting seeds of repair, the faith to walk into the year believing that with God's help and our hands, the world can yet be mended. May we be worthy of the tools placed in our care. May we be faithful with the materials entrusted to us. And may we become, together, the hands by which God's Presence is felt in this world, today.

And let us say: Amen.