

Being of Service - Serve God With Joy
1st Day Rosh Hashanah – September 29, 2011
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Shana Tova.

I'm told that my generation is the "Me Generation."

Has anyone heard this?

The experts characterize those of us born in the 70's, 80's, and 90's as spoiled, self-centered, and possessing a particular sense of entitlement. While I personally take offense at being labeled in this way, I do admit that the culture in which we live today has a heightened emphasis on the self. We are used to getting what we want.

You want a particular brand of shoes, brand of tea, brand of toothpaste, no need to settle for your 2nd choice. Just go online, and get exactly what you want. In the age of Tivo and ipods and smartphones, we no longer need to watch things we don't want to watch. We no longer need to listen to songs we don't want to hear. Even our news can be tailored to us. Go on the Yahoo homepage, for example. The articles they are showing you are selected based on their knowledge of your likes and dislikes. I know this, because this is what my husband does for a living. Personalization. Helping computers learn from watching us, so that they can serve us better and better.

Our modern culture has trained us to see the world as here to serve us. What I want to talk about today is looking at it the other way around, considering how we can be of service to the world.

This topic became of particular interest for me at our women's retreat this summer, when our host, the director of Land of Medicine Buddha retreat center, came to address us at Shabbat dinner. She did her annual welcome. She reminded us of the various rules of the Buddhist retreat center. And then she insisted, "If there's anything you need, just come ask. We are here to serve you. It's our practice to serve."

This woman was not a salesperson, trying to win more business with good customer service. This woman was a religious person, trying to live a better life, by spending her time serving others.

I clearly was not the only one taken with this comment. Throughout the weekend, I overheard various Kol Emeth women reflecting on her statement and on the palpable sense that the people living in this Buddhist community and showing up with a smile when we needed them to plunge our toilets, were truly happy to serve.

“But is it Jewish?” – one of our women wondered out loud. “Is it Jewish to glorify servitude? Serving others. Serving God.”

“To me it feels Christian,” replied another woman. “Making yourself subservient. Idealizing the suffering servant. Jews see themselves as partners with God,” she insisted, “not servants of God.”

Is this true though? Are we not here today, on Rosh Hashanah, to crown God as our King? In a few minutes, many of us will get down, fully prostrate on the ground, to bow low before the King of Kings, lifne Melech, Malchei Ham'lachim, Hakadosh Baruch Hu. Does this not have some implication for how we should then see ourselves?

Indeed, Judaism tells us we are servants of God. On Yom Kippur, we sing – *Ki anu amecha, v'atah eloheinu... Anu Avadecha v'atah Adoneinu*. We are Your people and You are our God. We are Your servants and You are our Master. It is not the only metaphor for our relationship with God, but it is a prominent one.

What does it mean though, to be God's servant? The Hebrew word is “eved,” eved Hashem. As you may know, *eved* can also mean “slave.” As in, *avadim hayinu l'paro b'mitzrayim*. We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. But Judaism does not see eved Hashem in this way. The Torah actually uses this term to describe Moses, at his death.

Vayamot sham Moshe, Eved Hashem (Eved Adonai), b'ereetz Moav, al pi Adonai. (Deut. 34:5) And Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there, in the land of Moab, by the mouth of the Lord.

Modern commentators assert that Eved Hashem here might better be translated, “the Lord’s minister or representative.” Apparently, this term has been found in inscriptions throughout the ancient near east, always connoting high status, the eved being a loyal and trusted agent of his master.

Moses is not the only one Judaism casts in this role, however. Every Jew is to be an agent of God. This is why we are called “Yisrael.” Most of us probably learned to translate Yisrael as “one who struggles with God.” It is likely, however, that the real root of Yisrael is “sar” - “minister,” like minister of the interior, “sar hapanim.” A Yisra-El is to be a minister of God. One who serves God, who does God’s work in the world.

As the Talmud teaches, “Just as God clothes the naked, you too must clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick, you too must visit the sick. Just as God comforts the mourner, you too must comfort the mourner. Just as God buried the dead (referring to Moses in the verse we just read), you too must bury the dead” (Sotah 14a).

Service to God doesn’t necessarily mean spending the day praying and sacrificing and singing God’s praises. As the famous Rabbi Ishmael insists, you can also serve God and love God by serving and loving God’s creatures. By letting your hands be God’s hands here on earth.

But what does this mean, on a practical level? Is this where I start my lecture on all the great things we could be doing with our time, and aren’t?

No. This is where I ask each of us: How are you of service already?

If you are willing (and please, don't be shy...)

Raise your hand if you have an elderly parent that you help care for?

Raise your hand if you have children that you care for?

Raise your hand if you have someone sick in your life – a friend, a family-member – for whom you try to be there – maybe you visit, maybe you call, maybe you bring meals, maybe you send cards.

Raise your hand if you teach?

Raise your hand if you're in another "helping profession"?

Raise your hand if you fix things for other people – appliances, broken whatevers. Raise your hand if you're the one family-members call when they're having trouble with their computer, their internet connection, their printer – you know who you are.

Raise your hand if you've ever been on the Kol Emeth board.

On a school board. On the board of another non-profit institution.

Raise your hand if you read Torah from time to time. If you've been to the daily minyan this year. If you've baked for a Kol Emeth Kiddush.

This room is full of people who are of service, and I would say - to God. But do we see ourselves this way?

Probably not. I want to make the argument that we should.

One of the women who was at our retreat, confided to me that after hearing the director of Land of Medicine Buddha act like getting us more towels would be a meaningful spiritual practice for her, she started looking at her own daily activities in a different way. Perhaps taking care of her 2 young children – making them breakfast, lunch, dinner, cleaning up messes, schlepping them to and fro, and all the little moments of teaching and giving and joy and aggravation in between – is her form of service, at this stage in her life.

"It's liberating," she insisted, "and kind of paradoxical."

“I no longer feel like I’m the slave. Instead I feel like I’m making a conscious choice to be of service. This is the service that I, uniquely, am in the place to provide for these 2 little human beings, and I may as well do it with a smile.

Service with a smile is more than a good business practice.

It’s a fundamental Jewish teaching, that we would do well to internalize. (Some might say it’s even worthy of a card.)

“Ivdu et Hashem b’Simcha” insists the Psalmist. “Serve God with joy!” Not with resentment. Not with fear. Not with the thought of “what am I going to get for doing this?” Serve God because that’s what we’re here on earth to do. And do it with joy.

It’s a tall order, to serve with joy. I don’t know about you, but my instinct, when someone calls to ask me to do something is usually to search my mind for why I can’t. I’m busy. I need to protect myself - my time, my kids, the routine my family counts on. Adding one more thing feels like it might just push me over. And so, I say no. Or worse, I say yes, but grudgingly. “It’s really an enormous inconvenience for me to do this, but I guess I can.” (Hopefully, I don’t actually say this, but the message might still come across.)

What’s the alternative though? To say yes to everyone who asks us for help? The needs in our world are so great. There are so many causes that need our time, our money, our advocacy, our attention. We need some way to prioritize.

In that spirit, I want to share with you a paradigm for thinking about service, that I learned from Rabbi Brad Artson, the Dean of the Conservative Rabbinical School in LA, and a rather busy guy himself. Rabbi Artson lifts up the Avodah, the famous “Service” of the Kohen Gadol, the High Priest, on Yom Kippur as a model. As the Yom Kippur liturgy records in vivid

detail, the atonement ritual of the Kohen Gadol, perhaps his greatest act of service to God (and the Jewish people), takes place in a series of steps.

First, he attends to himself. He goes to the mikvah and immerses. He is not allowed to proceed with any of his other duties until he first attends to his own body and spirit.

After that, he begins the rituals of atonement, and where must he begin – with himself and his family. Only after he has met the needs of his family, can he turn to atoning for his fellow kohanim. And only after attending to his fellow kohanim, can he then turn to the entire Jewish people.

Rabbi Artson asserts that this is the model we need as well – not for atonement, but for our own Avodat Hashem, our service to God.

We serve God by first taking care of the bodies that God has given us. Without our bodies, and renewed spirits, we can't do all the rest of the work we need to do, and so we must begin there.

Then, we must turn to our families. They need to be the first recipients of our service, not the last. We are not being selfish to prioritize our children, our parents, our spouse, our siblings. It is our responsibility to prioritize them. If we don't do it, no one will.

After our families, then we turn to our community. Our friends, our colleagues, our shul community. And after that, we turn to the entire Jewish people. And after that, Rabbi Artson adds, we turn to our entire world.

This paradigm is not meant to minimize the necessity of caring for Israel, or those in Darfur, or people suffering from starvation, poverty, or oppression throughout the world. There may be times that demand we all focus on service to Israel or on service to this country, or a particular crisis. But as a basic organizing principle, I find this order tremendously helpful.

Because it reminds me that Judaism doesn't expect us to be completely selfless. And it reminds me that Judaism doesn't want us to sacrifice our families, to serve the world. Judaism wants us to serve God, by serving those who need us most, and by doing it with joy, rather than resentment.

So let me ask you, what does it look like for you to serve with joy? Close your eyes, if you like. And try to picture yourself, being of service - doing what you already do, or doing some new form of service - with joy.

What are you thinking, when you're with your elderly parent? Your needy friend? Your crying kid in the middle of the night?

What are you thinking when you get the card saying it's your turn to support the evening minyan? When you get a call asking if you can make room for 3 more people at your already crowded Passover seder? When the stranger on the street corner asks you for help?

What I'm thinking, in my new consciousness, is "I get to do this."

I don't have to do it. I'm not a slave.

I am a Jew. A Yisrael. And what it means to be a Yisrael is that I get to serve God (every day of my life), to let my hands be God's hands, and to be of service.

When I first set out to write this sermon, I thought I would fill it with inspiring projects that deserve our volunteer time. We're trying to start a chevra kaddisha this year at Kol Emeth - a sacred community of volunteers trained to care for the dead - to perform the ritual washing, to sit with the body until burial, unparalleled acts of service. We also need new volunteers for the Chesed committee - to cook for those in need, to give rides, to visit homebound congregants, to set up shiva minyans. I could fill many many sermons with worthy projects in this community and far beyond.

But the focus of this sermon is not projects. The focus of this sermon is our mindset. The way in which we approach the projects and all the other tasks and people in our lives, that aren't projects, they're our lives.

We can see these roles and responsibilities as burdens, as obstacles to our happiness. Or, we can see them as the very way to find happiness.

Ivdu et Hashem b'simcha, implores our tradition. Serve God with joy.

Challenge yourself this new year to see each day as an opportunity to serve. And challenge yourself to do it with joy.

Shana Tova.

** If you would like a bright red card that says "Ivdu et Hashem B'simcha, SERVE GOD WITH JOY, just let me know. I have several extras.
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