

Erica Brown

IN THE
NARROW PLACES

DAILY INSPIRATION FOR THE THREE WEEKS

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Day One: 17 Tammuz

FAST OF SHIVA ASAR B'TAMMUZ

Seeking God

Do we achieve holiness, *kedusha*, through seeking God or through finding God? To answer this question, we turn to one of our sacred texts. The *haftara* for Minḥa, the afternoon service, on a fast day is an excerpt from Isaiah 55. It begins mid-chapter, at verse six and closes in the next chapter, verse eight. It contains some of the most religiously inspiring language in all of prophetic literature.

“Seek God where He can be found. Call to Him while He is near” (Isaiah 55:6). Isaiah offers wise, spiritual advice that is no less applicable to God than it is to all of our relationships. Reach out to God in a place where holiness can be found, when God feels near. Use the fast day as a mechanism for the contraction of the material and physical to create a greater space for the *Shekhina*, the Divine Presence. The tone of the day invites greater awareness of God. But Isaiah did not utter these words for a fast day; its incorporation into the service was a later adaptation of a text to enhance the day’s emotional demands.

What did the prophet mean when he pronounced these words? Perhaps Isaiah spoke from his awareness that God’s presence was not

always apparent during the average working day of an Israelite. Busy with harvesting fields, winnowing on the threshing floor or finding a fertile place to graze sheep, our ancestors could have spent their days preoccupied with the demands of family and making a living, not making a place for God. If this was a challenge for those who worked outside in nature every day, imagine how much greater an obstacle today's work environment presents to those of us who sit in offices all day. Without creating a clearing for God, a time and place for thinking above and beyond life's prosaic cares, how can we expect to find Him? If we are not searching, then that which we do not look for can hardly be expected to make itself known. It is like playing hide-and-seek and then not looking. The Kotzker Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Morgensztern (1787–1859) once poignantly remarked, "God is where you let Him in."¹

Isaiah continues to exhort his listeners, offering them both a reason that God may seem hidden and some sound advice about creating room for God:

Let the wicked give up his ways, the sinful man his plans. Let him turn back to the Lord, and he will pardon him to our God, for He freely forgives. **For My plans are not your plans, nor are My ways your ways** – declares the Lord. But as the heavens are high above the earth, so are My ways high above your ways and My plans above your plans. (Isaiah 55:7–9)

God is not like human beings – "My plans are not your plans" – in that God grants true forgiveness. If we genuinely make room for God, God will make room for us.

Human relationships do not always offer that degree of reciprocity. They are more like the gazelles of the Song of Songs. When one is ready to mate, the other cannot be found. One appears at the door to find the other asleep. When the sleeping one wakes, the other is already gone. This back-and-forth game of emotional hide-and-seek can prove exceptionally frustrating. Our own willingness to start afresh, to forgive,

1. As cited in Melinda Ribner, *Everyday Kabbalah: A Practical Guide to Jewish Meditation, Healing, and Personal Growth* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1998).

to seek forgiveness, may or may not be matched in the mind and heart of someone else. God, on the other hand, is poised and waiting for us when – and only when – we finally make room for God in our lives; when we are compassionate, forgiving, thoughtful people.

Among commentators, there is a division between those who regard seeking God as a challenge of time and those who consider it a challenge of space. Either certain times create the possibility of holiness, or certain places do. Rashi, citing a midrash, identifies a moment in time that is ripe for relationship with God: “Before the verdict takes place, when He still says to you, ‘Seek Me.’”² Seek God before life gets difficult, when God is reaching out to you, do not wait till things go wrong. There are always moments of tenderness in a relationship that should be enlarged, leveraged, expanded. Respond to those moments. Sometimes we let go too soon. We had the chance to say something that needed to be said, and the moment presented itself, but we let it go. There was a kind word or a compliment that should have been uttered, but wasn’t. It’s true in sacred times with others and also with God. There was a word of praise or gratitude we could have said in our *tefillot*, prayers, that we let slip away, or an apology that might have brought us closer to God, but we weren’t seeking and so we lost it. If you’re not looking then you won’t find God.

The second-century Aramaic translation of the text, *Targum Yonatan*, embellishes this reading in its paraphrase: “Pray to God while you are still alive.” Repent while you can, not when it is too late to fix what is broken. And so much is broken.

In an interesting Talmudic interpretation, King Manasseh, who ruled in Isaiah’s day, challenged this prophecy, saying that it contradicted something that Moses himself taught. In Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people that God responds whenever people call to Him.³ Should we seek God where God is or does God respond to us where we are? The Talmud reconciles this contradiction by saying that Moses was referring to communal repentance which is always accepted, whereas Isaiah’s pleas are for individual repentance, which has greater effectiveness during the

2. *Sifrei, Naso* 42.

3. Deuteronomy 4:7.

ten days between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur.⁴ There are specific times in the calendar year that nurture repentance. Seek God during those times, when the very air seems ready for transformation. But if you are part of a community then any time works since the power of seeking God in community is stronger.

The readings above interpret “where He is found” as a reference to time, but there are also readings that relate the search to place. According to the great medieval commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra, the verse refers to a changed historical reality: Once Isaiah predicted salvation from Babylon and the removal of the bonds of exile, the people could finally imagine finding God back in the land of Israel. Exile wears us down, leaving little time or mental space to engage in spiritual pursuits. Israel becomes *the* place to search for God.

The Jerusalem Talmud, in contrast, sees the place-of-finding as referring to synagogues and study halls.⁵ There are spaces that are specifically designated for spiritual behaviors and rituals, and these locations stir us to seek God. In the kinetic energy of a room full of genuine religious feeling or of people exchanging ideas, you can find God more easily. In between the pews of a synagogue, among people immersed in prayer, in the lofty sanctuaries that we build, we can make more room for God. Imagine being in a synagogue at night when all the people are gone and only the eternal light – the *ner tamid* – is alight. There is something holy about that place: the small flame in the big space, the darkness that removes visual distractions, the weight of silence – all of it signals transcendence.

It is not easy to predict where God is to be found, so sometimes we can fulfill Isaiah’s demand by identifying where God is *not* in our lives. We know that there are specific times when we feel too anxious to pray or too preoccupied with mundane chores and the needs of others to seek God. There are also places where it seems impossible to focus. There is too much going on, or too many people talking, or too much havoc for us to find God. Seek God in places not only where God is likely to be found but also where *you* are most receptive to God’s presence. Recep-

4. *Yevamot* 49b.

5. Jerusalem Talmud, *Berakhot* 5:1.

tivity can happen in the least likely of places. An open heart helps the spiritual seeker keep all possibilities present and ready. We may never find God, but the search brings us closer.

Kavana for the Day

Seeking is about discovery. Isaiah tells us to seek God where God is to be found. Think about where you might find God. People have a custom to pray and study in a “*makom kavua*,” a fixed location or place, every day. The idea is that we create spaces that are receptive to spiritual activities, where we have all that we need: the right light, the right balance of privacy and companionship, the right amount of noise or silence to induce spiritual behaviors. Think hard. Where does God seem most apparent in your life? What times and places seem more open and receptive to spiritual seeking and finding? Recreate those times and spaces and make your own *makom kavua*.