

Rabbi Chaya Gusfield's Rosh Hashanah Day Two Teaching 5781/2020

Shana Tova. The word for longing or yearning in Hebrew is GAGU'IM. I love that word. It sounds like what it means. Gagu'im. It is an important concept for us to explore this historic year. I believe many of us have been in a constant state of gagu'im/yearning. If we can tap into the experience of Gagu'im more consciously, Reb Zalman said our prayers during this time of Rosh Hashanah and the High Holy Days, and at anytime, could be more meaningful. I understand his invitation to mean that praying from a place of gagu'im or yearning could be healing to us, and others, in ways that might surprise us, and carry us through this challenging time.

We are also grieving. So much loss in our collective world experience and in our individual lives. I don't need to elaborate all the losses. We know. Many of us are crying out in grief, "How can there be a God that allows such suffering? "Where is God when the entire world is upside down?" Many might respond, "God is in the hands of the health care workers, or the people who deliver our much needed food, or with those who protest in the streets against white supremacy during this Great Racial Reckoning". And they would be right. Just as my answer to the question of where was God in the Shoah has often been, "in the hands of the righteous gentiles", or "God was crying/suffering alongside those who suffered." The idea that God was crying with us comes from the tradition that when our center of worship, the second temple, was destroyed 2000 years ago, the rabbis asked, "How could God have allowed the destruction of our people's center of worship?" Although they struggled with answering this question, they found ways to continue to feel connected to God as a comforting presence to help us through that very profound moment in history. A moment which could have destroyed Judaism. Instead Judaism survived, albeit in very new and different ways. The rabbis taught that the Shekhinah, the presence of God, literally lived in the ancient temple. When the destruction happened, she went into exile with the Jewish people, with us.

As we feel the suffering of injustice, the Shechinah feels the suffering of injustice. As we cry, she cries with us. At a time when we were grieving the destruction of our entire way of life, we were taught that the Shechinah was with us. Even exiled with us.

The rabbis continue to see the presence of the Shechinah in our lives as the center of much of Jewish practice. This personal presence motivates us to study, to pray in community, but it also helps us understand that we are not separate from the suffering we witness. Right now we are witnessing a lot of suffering and have serious

concern for future suffering. Unemployment, illness and deaths from the virus and from increased poverty. We are witnessing the murder of black people and the frightening response to the protests by the state. By understanding that we are not separate from the suffering we witness, the hope is that we will act to affect good in the world. It motivates us into action. It keeps us from ignoring the hungry, the homeless, the oppressed.

So, if we know that the Shechinah is with us during these pandemics, why do so many of us we feel so bereft, alone, and hopeless? A story which might help us answer this. It might surprise you.

About 5 weeks into the pandemic, I couldn't feel the presence of God, the Shechinah, or any hope at all.

I was overwhelmed with profound individual and collective grief. Even as I prayed with very sick people in the hospital and prayed with their grieving families, I felt deep inside that God had been kidnapped and I felt alone. I yearned to find God. But I had no idea how to begin. I was frozen. Prior to this time I had a very expansive experience of God. From Adonai, to Ruach Ha'olam, to Shekhinah. I knew that God was the Source of All and experienced in as many ways as there are words. However, at this low point, I only experienced the God who had been kidnapped as "Eloheinu Melech Haolam, God, Our God, King of the World". The whole world. And I wanted to find "Him". Maybe I was going back to my childhood where that was my primal only way of experiencing God. My chevruta, my study partner, who has known me for many years, was quite surprised that I was talking about God as being kidnapped. He was shocked that I couldn't feel God in the ways people were coming together helping each other out, or in how the earth was healing from slowing down. In contrast, the image I had was that God was in a very remote cave somewhere and there was no map to find Him. Yes, I felt alone and abandoned. I felt the world had been abandoned. Yes, I was grieving, yet the yearning, the yearning was also there wondering where God was.

I was in a state of *gagu'im*. I was longing to feel something greater than myself. In addition to acknowledging and experiencing our grief, tapping into our yearning can be a key to our resilience. And maybe more.

I call this yearning ITSELF God or HaMAKOM, the place. The place where all exists. It is the force that moves, awakens, transforms, accompanies. It is the force that heals and motivates me to be a healing force when I can. Yearning is its own answer to the question of "where is God in this suffering? When I remember that my yearning is the key to feeling the Shechinah here with us, I can take the next step. I take the next step to finding the maps to find God, to take them out and study them

and then go on the path to find that cave. Melech Ha'Olam will become more than just the King, but the Source of All, HaMakom, the place.

My prayer for us today is that when life feels hopeless, we can remember that beneath hopelessness, is the yearning for hopefulness. Let me repeat that. Beneath hopelessness is a yearning for hopefulness. When we find that yearning, it will be our guide. With each step we take, we will be able to remember and actually feel that the yearning itself is The Source of All, that many call the Shechinah. And she is sitting right here, right now, crying with us, celebrating with us, and walking us through this time.

And let us say, AMEN

Take a moment and reflect: What are you yearning for? Where is your yearning living in your body?