

Rabbi Steve Cohen  
 Yom Kippur morning, October 2, 2006  
 Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

In ancient times, when the Temple in Jerusalem still stood, at the climax of this holiest day of the year, the High Priest would pronounce out loud the four-letter name of God. This name was never pronounced at any other time during the year, and when the people heard this holiest word in the world, issuing from the lips of the High Priest, in the holiest place in the world, on the holiest day of the year, they would fall on their faces and cry out *Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va-ed*. "Praised be the name of his glorious kingdom forever and ever." When the Temple was destroyed in 70CE, all the Temple ceremonies came to a halt, including this one, and so for 2,000 years no Jew has spoken the holiest word in our religion, the name of God.

We still see the name all the time...the four-letters are yud, heh, vav, heh and this name appears hundreds of times in the Torah and constantly in our prayer book, although usually with the abbreviation yud-yud. But when we see it, if we are reading out loud, we speak a completely different word than what is written. We speak the word Adonai, which literally means "My lords." This is a substitution; it's as though whenever we saw the name "Mark Childs," in print, we said out loud "The Cantor." ,Yud-heh-vav-heh is the personal, intimate name of God, but we do not pronounce it; we have forgotten how to say it, and substitute God's title instead.

For the past 2,000 years, therefore, our religion has been in a very basic way, "broken." Judaism is a religion built upon language and the power of words, but we have forgotten how to pronounce the single most important word in the religion! And we become acutely aware of this brokenness today, on Yom Kippur, which was once the one day in the year when that name was spoken...and the four realms of time, space, soul and language all came together in a convergence of holiness.

The loss of God's name has not been an entirely bad thing. As a matter of fact, it has turned out to be a powerful and evocative way of expressing a great truth, which is that we do not know God. We occasionally catch a glimpse of something miraculous, and experience bits and pieces of divine revelation, but we cannot begin to conceive of the reality of God. And the limited nature of our knowledge is represented very well by this four-letter name, which we can see...but cannot read. The brokenness at the heart of our religion teaches us about the brokenness of our knowledge of God. For us limited human beings, God's name...like God...is ultimately a mystery.

We modern Jews know all about broken religion. For us, all the old myths have been shattered; the old traditional relationship with God has been lost. In the traditional Jewish world, a Jew was taught and never doubted that God spoke the entire Torah to Moses, who wrote it down faithfully word for word. We modern Jews doubt that. A Jew in the pre-modern world stepped out of his or her regular routine three times a day to pray, to enter into dialogue with God, who he or she believed was listening and cared just as a parent cares for their child. And a Jew in the pre-modern world on Yom Kippur prayed fervently to be granted another year of life, and would tremble on this day, full of hope and dread.

Most of us here today are reading words out of the book and we see their beauty and we appreciate the poetry. But like the four-letter name of God, we can see the

words...but to speak them with honesty and conviction them is difficult. Even impossible. We respect our ancestors who kept this tradition alive, enough to come back for at least one more year, and to go through the motions yet again. But we doubt that these words and this tradition can effectively express our real relationship with a living God. We are not necessarily atheists; we have experienced moments of holiness and divinity in our lives, but the Jewish way of calling out to God....we have forgotten. We just don't remember God's name.

For most of us, on a day to day basis, this is not a problem. Life is busy and full of the practical challenges of making a living, and keeping the house in some semblance of order, and keeping the kids' faces and tushies clean, and keeping our tires inflated and the oil changed. None of these things requires knowing the name of God. Moreover, if we want to feel some emotional elevation, we can go to a concert, or a movie, or the beach, or watch a football game and be moved, to tears of happiness or sorrow. And none of these requires knowing the name of God, unless we want to use it to curse our team's quarterback for throwing yet another interception. Of course that, technically, is breaking one of the Ten Commandments.

In all of our lives, however, sooner or later, a time comes when we need to pray. Our five-year-old child or grandchild is running a high fever and we are scared. Or we have just been told that the lump in our breast is malignant. Or we just narrowly avoided a terrible car accident, and feel overcome with a need to say thank you.

At the beginning of this summer, my friend Natalie Myerson called me and told me that Raymond was asking for me. She made it clear that he was nearing the end of his life. I came over late on a Shabbat afternoon and the sunlight was pouring in the window of Raymond and Natalie's bedroom. Raymond, who had often explained to me over the years that he was not a religious man, greeted me with "Hello Rabbi. What can you tell me about God?" There are moments in our life in which we would like to know God's name.

We live, at different times in our life, on different levels of reality. Most of the time we live on the level of ordinary life, the level of work, and play and chores. But there are other realities, hidden realities that peak through the cracks of our lives, in small exchanges of love, or burst through, often at the great moments of birth or death. Those are the moments which give meaning to our lives: when the ordinary reality of our life falls away, before the grandeur of the transcendent. All of us, if we have experienced anything of life, both yearn for and fear the encounter with the transcendent. We yearn for it because it gives our life meaning. We fear it, because we have forgotten God's name. We have forgotten how to pray.

Today is Yom Kippur, and even though the ancient Temple was destroyed 2,000 years ago, this day remains the holiest day of the year. Here we are, all together, not in the Jerusalem Temple, but in our Temple here in Santa Barbara. If we are ever going to pray, this would be a good time...but how? For those of us who have never prayed before in our lives, or not since we were little kids, what do we do? How do we begin? What words should we use?

Twenty-seven years ago, I was a first year rabbinic student in Jerusalem. We took a class trip to Sinai. The Sinai wilderness is beyond wild; it is a different planet. Utterly dry, a rocky, mountainous region. We drove in one day's journey in land rovers, camped out at the foot of Mount Sinai, under a sky drenched with stars, and climbed the mountain

the next day. On the top of the mountain, where tradition says that Moses received the Ten Commandments, my classmates and I encountered a new, devastating, soul-shattering silence. After some time, we descended the mountain and drove out to the oasis of Dahab on the Red Sea. There we were given fins and snorkels and dove down into azure blue water, among thousands of dazzling fish, next to one of the most spectacular coral reefs in the world.

The mountaintop and the underwater coral reef were both alternative universes...far removed from our everyday reality. And both were places of silence. The next morning we got up before dawn and as the sun rose over the mountains in the East, I prayed for the first time in my adult life.

Judaism teaches in many places, in many ways: If you want to pray, begin with silence. Go to a place of silence. Become completely still. The Hebrew word for desert is midbar, which is very close to the word dibbur, which means speech. If you want to learn to speak, first become as still and as quiet as the desert. Out of silence, new speech is born.

This afternoon, we will read the story of Jonah, who was running from God and found himself going down...to Jaffa, and down into the hold of the ship, and down into the waters, and ultimately into the belly of the fish. At the end of three days and three nights in that deep, profoundly silent place, we read: "And Jonah prayed to the Eternal his God out of the belly of the fish."

The ancient rabbis, according to the Mishnah, used to sit for an hour before standing and opening their mouths to pray. What were they doing, those old rabbis, sitting there waiting to become ready to pray? They were becoming still. It would take a while. First they would be thinking to themselves: "This robe is kind of itchy." Or "Next time I'm going to pick a better stone to sit on." After about twenty minutes, they would be thinking about the latest news from Rome, or worrying about the burning of the forests in the north, or whether the rains would come early or late that year. After forty minutes they would be thinking about their children, and whether they seemed happy, or about their friend who was suffering from a strange illness. And after one hour, their hearts would be purified and open, receptive and new and they would rise up in prayer, ready to give and to receive the words of God.

For us also, the Jews of Santa Barbara...two thousand years after those ancient rabbis...it is not too late. Yes, we no longer know the name of God, and yes our religion has been broken for some time. But still, it is not too late. Today, this afternoon, find a quiet place, and sit in silence. Listen to your heart beat, to your blood flow, to your lungs breathing and to the quiet voice of God within.

If you like, I invite you to stay here after this service. Instead of our usual hour of discussion between this service and the family service, a few of us, the hardcore, will sit here in silent preparation for the end of the day. Later this afternoon, we will retell the story of the High Priest in the ancient Temple, and when describing the moment of speaking God's four-letter name, we will stretch ourselves out on the floor...as our ancestors have done every year at this time only...and cry out "Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam vaed." Blessed is the name of God's glorious kingdom forever and ever.

We know those words, most of us, because we usually say them immediately after the central prayer of our religion, which begins "Shma," which means "be silent and listen." Moses taught us the Shma, and he knew the power of silence. As he told God at

the Burning Bush: I am not a man of words. He climbed Mount Sinai alone, and stood there in the silence, out of which God spoke the words of Torah. In fact, all the great prophets of our people, who taught us how to hear the word of God, were able to speak only because they knew how to become still. They were not convinced of the brilliance of their own opinions, nor were they obsessed with being right and proving the other side wrong. The prophets knew that ultimately, God is unknowable...and that the way to bring forth the word of God is to open up a sacred, empty space, a silent holy of holies, inside ourselves, within which God can dwell.

When we grow silent, we allow God to dwell within us; then we do not need to know God's name, nor do we need this book, nor Hebrew, nor any knowledge at all. God's voice speaks out of our silence. And that's how we learn how to pray.