

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

Perhaps one of the most fundamental questions that we can ask as Jews is: What does God want from me? What am I supposed to do here and now that will somehow garner God's favor, reward, and blessing both in this world and in the world to come? This question is not only a Jewish question, but rather it is a question that people of all faiths and religions must grapple with when attempting to construct their lives in such a way that responds to the Divine Presence, or even the lack thereof, in our world. What will it take to move God, if such a thing is even possible? Asked differently, what am I supposed to do with this life of mine?

The same question is asked rhetorically by Moses in his final speech to the Israelites as they stand assembled on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, the Land of Israel within sight. He asks them, *ועתה ישראל, מה ה' שואל מעמך?* "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you?"

One of the greatest sages of our tradition, R' Meir, attempts to explain this verse. He notes that the word for "what," *מה*, is very similar to the word for "100," *מאה*. So, instead of reading Moses' words as a question, "What does God demand of you," he reads it instead as a statement "God demands 100." One hundred of what? The answer: one hundred blessings. And thus was born the Jewish teaching that one should aspire to recite 100 blessings each and every day of one's life. And yes, 100 seems like a lot of *baruch atah's*, I agree. But reaching the number isn't as hard as you may imagine. After

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

all, simply being here in the synagogue and reciting our daily prayers, reading through the liturgy of the siddur or machzor, will get you most of the way there! So for now, let us turn to the liturgy of Rosh HaShannah itself and focus on one part of one very long extended blessing, before we return to this notion of 100 blessings per day.

Over the course of these two days we recite the special Amidah for Rosh HaShannah numerous times. In the third blessing, one that is typically rather short when recited alone and elongated to become the *Kedushah* when repeated by the *chazzan*, we have here a rather long blessing, one which includes the phrase “ויעשו כולם” “אגודה אחת לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם,” by which we pray to God to “bind us all together as one community in order to wholeheartedly fulfill Your will.” During these days of awe, these days during which the entire people of Israel gathers together within each of their own communities to daven, to sing, to learn, and to grow together, it is not at all mysterious that we pray for such a situation to repeat itself during the year ahead. Of course we wish for the sanctuaries of our synagogues to be teeming with friends each and every day. Of course we wish to gather as one cohesive community throughout the year. This is no secret. Difficult to achieve, yes, but a secret—no. And to serve God wholeheartedly? What other way could we possibly imagine demonstrating our gratitude, confessing our sins, and supplicating in prayer before the Holy Blessed One

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

other than wholeheartedly? This too is no mystery. But what could it possibly mean to fulfill God's will, לעשות רצונך? This is hidden. This is a mystery.

Before I attempt to even posit an answer to that question, I must admit that it is somewhat uncomfortable to even ask. Why is that? Why is it that we shudder at the thought of contemplating God's will? Perhaps it is because we cannot truly *know* God's will at all! We can barely know the thoughts and wills of our family and friends, and we have there the possibility of asking this question and maybe even receiving an honest answer from them! But what about God—how can we seek out and determine God's will? Doing so requires a deep sense of humility, and an acknowledgment of how profoundly little we actually know about the Divine Presence in this world.

But more than that, I think we shudder to engage in this task of considering “what is God's will?” because it has been co-opted, poisoned, and so terribly transformed by religious extremism across the globe. Who dares to declare that they know the will of God? That they would go so far as to take the lives of other human beings, claiming that they do so in God's name? This is my great discomfort in this endeavor. But as a person of faith, of one who believes so strongly in the teachings of our *mesorah*, our tradition, one who feels the Divine Presence permeating the world in even the most mundane places, I cannot simply abandon the task of trying to determine

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

God's will, and I will not allow those who have corrupted and mutilated the concept to take it away from me. Nor will I let them take it from you.

Rather, we can and we should reclaim the idea, reassert ourselves as worthy seekers of the answer to the question: What is God's will, and how can we live in a way that honors and fulfills it?

Let us begin then to answer the question of God's will, of רצון ה', by looking at our foundational text, the Torah. In Exodus 19 we read of the great pageantry of that day upon which God appeared before all of the people of Israel and made clear God's will: "...As morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a **very loud blast of the horn**; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and **they took their places at the foot of the mountain**. Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Lord had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. The **blare of the horn grew louder and louder**. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder" (Exodus 19:16-19). What follows this passage is what you know as the Ten Commandments, the only *mitzvot* of the Torah spoken directly by God to the people of Israel—the others are all mediated through Moses. At this moment, when the community is gathered together as one, אגודה אחת, it stands at the foot of Sinai awaiting one of the most terrifying, and simultaneously the most

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

intimate encounters with the Holy Blessed One, with God. This is the beginning of our understanding of God's will.

The rabbinic teachings that followed the Torah in what we know as the *Mishnah*, *Talmud*, and various *midrashim* are all an attempt to respond to *not only* this moment of revelation at the foot of Sinai, but to the Torah overall and all of its 613 mitzvot. God has called out to this community, both literally and through the Divine inspiration of our ancestors, and thus has placed before us all the opportunity to engage in these teachings, to take hold of them for ourselves, to accept an eternal gift and make use of it each and every day of our lives. The commandments, the *mitzvot* of the Torah, are this gift. They are the tools by which we can enrich our lives, deepen our connection to the Divine, and as a result, better the world around us by living in response to God's will.

For thousands of years, Judaism has acknowledge and faced this struggle. Our Sages who lived nearly two thousand years ago were responsible for the transformation of a religion rooted in the laws of the Torah, centered around the Jerusalem Temple and its sacrificial system. But with its destruction in the year 70 CE they had to reimagine Judaism by reimagining God's will. No longer was a system of sacrifice and Temple worship an option for the establishment of a connection between us and the Divine. And so our Sages who witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE responded by

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

wholeheartedly embarking on a project to make the fulfillment of God's will an option for all Jewish people.

And thus from the 613 mitzvot of the Torah, our tradition has grown into a religion so richly punctuated by rituals and observances, prayers and blessings, actions and abstentions. And thus Judaism's great answer to the age old question of how do we fulfill God's will, of how do I deepen and enrich my personal connection with the Divine, is to engage in a life of mitzvot! It is incumbent upon me as Jew to step forward and place myself, metaphorically speaking of course, at the foot of Sinai just as my ancestors did thousands of years ago. To stand before a mountain engulfed in smoke and flame, bearing the incredible claps of thunder, perhaps even trembling at the piercing cries of the shofar coming from above. There is no doubt that this position which we have chosen to take is powerful, intimidating, even frightening. But all of that is pageantry—it is simply the conditions that help to prepare us for the weight of the gift that is being laid at our feet, for the enormity of the project of what it means to live life as a Jewish person, to live in response to God's will.

But how can we possibly stand at our metaphorical Sinai when the scene is so terrifying, when the moment is so intimidating? By taking one small, step forward. Just one. That is the simple answer to a very complex and sincere question. I stand before you today not as one who has reached the top of the mountain, for I am not that Moses.

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

I stand before you today not as one who has already completed the journey to the foot of Sinai and back, for I am not Israel. But rather I am with all of you in the camp. I am with you in the wilderness, and I am asking you to join me on a journey. I am asking you to stand beside me as I put my foot forward and leave the mundane, typical life of the protected confines of the camp and instead step forward and move towards Sinai.

But before we head out of the camp, let me explain that I have spent the past ten years of my life walking towards Sinai. What I mean by that is that, although I was raised in a household committed to Jewish values, to synagogue life, and to Israel, it was not until I was a bit older that I began to seriously take on the observance of the mitzvot. That journey began in earnest when I was in college, and my parents can and should be credited with giving me the things that I needed for that journey to begin. So over this past decade I have tried to step forward towards Sinai, to learn more about my tradition and my God, and to enrich my life through the embrace of new mitzvot, new commandments, each and every year. But at this moment, on Rosh HaShannah, I'd like to imagine myself as being back in the camp—not in the sense that I've discarded what I have learned, nor that I have abandoned the journey itself. Rather, I'd like to imagine that I'm in a new camp, one that is closer to Sinai, and one that includes within its boundaries all of you sitting here today.

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

For the past two years I have had the incredible privilege of serving as your rabbinic intern here at Shelter Rock. I was welcomed into an incredibly warm and unique community of Conservative Jews who care deeply about Torah, about God, about Israel, and about each other. Amongst the Conservative congregations of the United States you are indeed special and unique as an egalitarian community deeply committed to observance of mitzvot and engagement with the study of Torah. Those are the values that bind us together as one community, **אגודה אחת**. But as individuals you are also unique and differentiated from one another. Some of you are committed to advocacy for Israel, while others focus more on their observance of Shabbat and kashrut; others are invested in fulfilling the mitzvah of Tikkun Olam and others are passionate about learning and prayer. And indeed there are some who hold back, some of you, who like me in my younger days, stand at the fringes of the camp and look on, unsure as to how exactly to take that step forward, to move towards the foot of Sinai and hear God's will. Perhaps you even question the point of it all.

And so in response to you I say that I have lived both on the fringes and also at the center of the camp. As a young person I was not all that committed to mitzvot, although my family was, as I've noted, deeply connected to our synagogue and communal Jewish life. And as the years passed I felt a need within me to pursue more, to seek out God's will, and to live a life in response to it. And I can proudly and say that

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

I did not go from zero to 613 overnight! The task of enriching one's life with Judaism and its commandments is a journey and a transformation, not a particular moment or event. It happens gradually and incrementally, just like a hike from the camp towards the mountain. And so too the impact on one's life is gradual and incremental. The more you do, and the longer you have been doing it directly relates to the positive impact that the experience can have on your life. I am not recommending or suggesting that you radically change who you are as a person, but rather that you add another dimension to your life, that you take on new mitzvot this year and commit to them for an extended period of time, and only thereafter reflect on its impact. Living a life suffused with mitzvot is like taking a picture of the same scene with an entirely different camera lens—although the scene before you has not changed, the picture can differ in radical ways. And so too with your life and Judaism—you can maintain the same job, the same friends, the same home, and the same car, but by including mitzvot in your life you will hopefully come to see it all in an entirely new way. More than anything, I believe that the mitzvot teach us to be mindful. They force us to pause and take note of the incredible world around us, and they give us the opportunity to express gratitude to God for life's simplest pleasures.

So I am asking you all, indeed imploring you all, to join me as I step forward into the new year of 5777 and once again move towards Sinai. I can almost promise that we

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

won't reach it this year, but I know that we'll get closer than ever before, and I know that we'll do so because we have an entire community of compassionate, intelligent, and dedicated Jewish people standing at our side. And each and every year of our lives we will take more steps forward, we will see Sinai growing ever larger along the horizon, we will begin to hear the deafening sound of the thunder in the distance, to feel the enormity of the moment of revelation. And we will feel ourselves getting closer and closer to God. And yes, we may indeed find ourselves frightened or intimidated at times, wanting to stop in our tracks and even to turn back, but as a community we will hold each other together. Certainly some will run ahead and others will linger behind, and that too is okay, as long as we do not forget about each other, about the importance of engaging in this task together as one, united community.

So now you may want to know, how do I take that one step forward in my life? What can you do tomorrow that is somehow different from today. I'll try to help. I'll try to help by offering you one real, and very achievable step. I'll ask you to do just one more mitzvah, to take on just one more new Jewish ritual in 5777. Feel free to take on more, I'm not demanding you to hold back, but at the very least, you shall each take on one more mitzvah. And to make it even easier, I have a suggestion: Say one more bracha; say one more blessing; get even closer to 100 a day, or even surpass it.

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

As Jews we recite *brakhot*, we recite blessings for so many different occasions—before lighting Shabbat and holiday candles, before reading from the Torah, before shaking the lulav and etrog, before lighting the Chanukkah candles. And those are the ones we know so well, the ones that we learn at a young age in preschool, Hebrew school, day school, or at home. Some of the first blessings we learn are those related to food—*hamotzi* before bread and *borei pri hagafen* before wine, and there are others! But there is one food-related *brakha* that is particularly useful to know, because it serves as a “catch-all” for foods and drinks that do not have their own particular blessing. Fruits and vegetables have their own, baked goods has their own, but what about the blessing that we recite before we drink of a beverage other than wine? What is the blessing that is to be recited before we sip our coffee or tea each morning...and who doesn’t at least drink one of those when they arise? (It works for orange juice and water too, if that’s more of your thing in the morning!). So I’d like to teach it to you now. The blessing that is recited before we drink our morning joe:

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדַבָּרוֹ. Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, with whose word all things come into being. The language of this blessing allows us to acknowledge that even coffee, even tea, even orange juice, was in a certain sense created by Divine fiat, simply by God speaking the words. It is, on the surface, an allusion to Genesis 1, to the six days of creation during which God formed

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

the earth, its features, and its plant and animal life simply by *speech*, simply by speaking the words themselves. No physical exertion or manipulation. No machinery or manpower needed. Such is the power of the Holy Blessed One—to declare something to be, and thus will it into existence. And thus we raise up our mugs each morning and bless God, we thank God, that He included the coffee bean and the tea leaf amongst His wondrous creations, and gave humankind the intelligence to experiment with such creations and to make from them the delicious morning beverages with which so many of us begin our days.

Some of you knew this blessing already. Fair enough. But do you say it before you take a drink? And others did not know it, and you are undoubtedly asking, How am I possibly going to remember that later? So I have a solution to that too. In the coming days, each household that is part of the Shelter Rock Jewish Center will receive their very own SRJC coffee mug, complete with our name, logo, and the words of this brakha that I have just taught to you! It will serve, I hope, as a reminder each morning, to pause and recite its words before taking that gulp of coffee you so desperately need to begin the day. And it will remind you of these words I have shared with you this morning. It will remind you as you begin each day anew that you are part of this community, that you are part of this communal journey towards Sinai, and that your recitation of that particular brakha is another step forward for us each and every day.

Rosh HaShannah Sermon
5777
Mitchell Berkowitz
Shelter Rock Jewish Center

It is not said with the expectation that we'll receive some tangible reward in the immediate aftermath thereof. It is not said with the assumption that somehow we have magically bestowed God's blessing into our coffee. But rather it is said with an acknowledgment of the gratitude we feel for the mere existence of coffee in our world! (The history of which is fascinating, at least according to my 7th grade research paper on the topic.) And it is said as just one of the 100 blessings we aspire to recite as Jews every day. And thus the recitation of this blessing allows us to be more mindful of the gifts of this world, of the great gratitude we have for our heritage, for our Judaism, and for the courage and audacity of our ancestors who stood at the foot of Sinai and worked so hard to transform God's words into actions, those commands into a lifestyle, and that moment into a journey. Join me, join with the person sitting at your side, with the person sitting in front of and behind you. Join together as a community and commit to living wholeheartedly in response to God's will, לעשות רצונך בלבב שלם.