

Playing Hide and Seek with God

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Where is love? Does it fall from skies above?
Is it underneath the willow tree that I've been dreaming of?
Who can say where she may hide?
Must I travel far and wide,
'til I am beside the someone who
I can mean something to?

In the musical *Oliver*, the title character seeks love in far off places. Where does love reside? Can love be found in the sky? Underground? Who *can* say where love lives? Oliver lives a dismal life, sold into servitude, hemmed in by cruelties that could leave him robbed of even the capability of love, and justifiably so. He can neither see nor sense love around him. Yet he never gives up looking for it, and in the end, love *does* come to him. And as it turns out, he didn't need to look very far. More remarkable than Oliver's eventual success in finding love is the mere fact that although love seems to him to be a distant, far-off dream, he *never gives up the search*.

Oliver's quest for earthly love echoes our daily quest for divine love. Where is God? Is God, as our liturgy of transcendence suggests, a far-off Creative Source, distant from us in some supernal realm in the skies above? Or is God an imminent, personal Parent, close by, and underneath the nearby willow tree?

Our quest for the Divine is not a new one; we've been playing "hide and seek" with God since we left Egypt. In Parshat Pekudei, our ancestors also strove to come close to the Divine Presence, through assembling and dedicating the Tabernacle as a place for encountering the Divine: "When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of Adonai filled the Tabernacle" (Exod. 40:33-34). The dedication of the Tabernacle, God's

"dwelling place" on earth, was completed as God's Presence filled and rested upon it.

Yet God's Holy Presence wasn't just hidden inside the Tent of Meeting, where only the priests would be able to see it. The closing line of Exodus provides us with an image of that Presence being *outside* the tent as well, for all of Israel to see. "For over the Tabernacle a cloud of Adonai rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, *in the view of all the house of Israel* throughout their journeys" (Exod. 40:30).

Today we may not have the physical dwelling place of the Tabernacle in which to encounter God. But we do continue to create holy spaces in which to connect to The Holy One. Our tradition further teaches that each of *us ourselves* is a holy space, a *mishkan me'at*, a small personal sanctuary for the Divine. When we pray, our tallit becomes that sheltering cloud of God's Glory and we continue to seek God's presence from within it. And like Oliver, that love and comfort we seek does come to us. Every time we pray and wrap ourselves in the tallit, we are presented with the gift of a chance to envelop ourselves in a manifestation of God's love. At our most vulnerable moments, our Creator, our Compassionate Parent, is there to protect us.

Each morning, in the dim light of dawn when I wake up, eyes still glazed, body still stiff and creaky from the night's sleep—I am vulnerable. Barely able to formulate a complete thought before a cup of coffee, I turn to God in prayer. Many mornings, I would much rather wrap myself back in my blanket and fall back into bed. Yet the moment I take my silky tallit, the color of the sky, out of its bag, and let it fall over my shoulders, I feel protection and a warmth that no simple blanket could provide.

From the first light of dawn, until the very last ray of evening twilight, we embark on our daily quest for God, often

finding that love elusive and hard to locate. Yet perhaps, like Oliver, we have looked too far, and have called out too loudly. S.Y. Agnon, in his short story “The Other Tallit,” describes a Yom Kippur that epitomizes our search:

Whenever the cantor wrapped his tallit around his face and invoked “*Chei Haolamim*, The Force that Makes Life in the Universe,” I would be perplexed, for the cantor called to God in a loud voice even though God was right there! Why did he cover his face? If he uncovered his face, the whole congregation would be filled with a great joy such as I felt when I played peek-a-boo with my father. We used to look for each other until, finally, I would reveal my face, and then we found each other.

Perhaps we are trying too hard. Perhaps, like Oliver, we are looking far and wide for what is beside us all along. Perhaps like our ancient ancestors in the wilderness, we expect God’s Presence to greet us in a particular time and space. The cantor covers his face and shouts out for God. Yet, as the young narrator senses, God is right there! Uncover your face, says the narrator. Or perhaps simply open your eyes—God is there, in the tallit, surrounding you. Like a child covering his face to play peek-a-boo, we don’t let ourselves see what is right there.

Yet the lesson of the tallit suggests that the opposite might be true; perhaps only when we cover our face, freed from distractions, sheltered in God’s protecting embrace, and enveloped in the love of the tallit, when we enter our own personal, intimate Tent of Meeting with God, can we truly know God is right there. Somewhere in the balance of this twilight, between the covered and the uncovered, lies the answer. Perhaps we must surround ourselves in God’s love, feel the embrace of the tallit, and only *then* uncover our eyes and come out of the Tent, to allow ourselves to truly see that God is right there.

May each of us have the clarity of vision in these twilight moments, to know that God is right there, surrounding us,

engaged in this delicate game of peek-a-boo with us. May we, like the child whose hands can cause a familiar face to disappear momentarily, allow ourselves that joy of rediscovery that comes in that revelatory moment when our faces are again uncovered. May we, like the Israelites in the wilderness, look up to see God’s holy Presence right in our very eyes. For while we may let ourselves become distracted from the divine comfort and love that surrounds us, we need only open our eyes and let God in.