

An open letter to God.

Dear Eternal One,

We are in shul this Rosh Hashanah because we want to be, not simply because we are supposed to be. With a new prayerbook in our hand, we are making a new prayer to you. We are speaking up with a new voice in a new way. We who are not bound to traditional liturgy and imagery, we can say aloud that we are deeply in need of a new way to understand You in our lives. The theology we come to on the High Holy Days-- a king enthroned on high, us as penitent subjects; your loving parental encouragement and our asking forgiveness for our sins—it is familiar... but increasingly, for some, unfulfilling. Avinu Malkenu, we have become rote and obedient in our prayers. We confess, we are not crying out to you from a place of authenticity, and that, as the Jew knows, must be the starting place for our relationship with you. Authentic. Real. Heartfelt.

I suppose we knew this day was coming. Time to re-balance between the comfort of the familiar and the strangeness of what is new. When we stop challenging ourselves in our dialogue with You, when we fall into the familiar words and imagery, then we fall into prayer as obligation. We begin to think that You are static in our lives, we forgo looking for You, from finding you in the most dynamic and sublime ways of the world...we begin to think that You dwell between page 10 and 510, rather than in every possibility, in every moment. Our conversation with You doesn't start and end in shul. Our prayerbook- an old one, a new one—is not the goal; it is the tool one tool a beautiful tool—for connecting us to You, connecting us to each other, challenging us to deepen and grow, to reach for you inside ourselves, to experience you outside of ourselves. We are in shul not because we are supposed to be, but because we want to be; we want to find you anew, so that we can find ourselves anew.

There was nothing wrong with the Gates of Repentance. I pray that each of us continues to turn to a beloved meditation or prayer found within, that brought meaning over the years. We add to *that*, new words, new ways of reaching for You, God...lest over time our words are out of sync with our thoughts-- and we find ourselves spiritually astray. In every generation, we are to experience you in our way—and so we reach for you with new imagery. Our fathers looked for a commanding God, to help them live obedient to an all-encompassing lifestyle. Our mothers looked for a compassionate King, as they sought to live a life defined by their faith. We are a different generation. A religion that does not speak to the heart and the intellect risks losing every one of us. Judaism does not have that luxury. Religion today is in peril of being discarded by secularists as unnecessary, or embraced by extremists as a weapon of power, or abandoned by our friends for being irrelevant. But we remain. We are Shaarit Yisrael, the Remnant of Israel, and we are here to say:

when the language of our fathers becomes stale then we must speak to You in our contemporary voice:

In Mishkan HaNefesh, poet Ruth Brin expresses it this way:

When men were children they thought of You as a father

When men were slaves they thought of You as a master

When men were subjects they thought of You as a king.

But I am a woman, not a slave, not a subject,

Not a child who longs for You as father or mother.

I might imagine You as teacher or friend, but those images

Like king, master, father or mother are too small for me now.

We will not walk away because our own life experiences may have caused us to outgrow how we once understood You. Not long ago, Rabbi Brad Artson, a leading Conservative rabbi here in L.A., wrote personally of his rejection of traditional theology. It was after the birth of his beautiful son Jacob. "Jacob's diagnosis of autism shook every conviction and made clear that my conventional liberal

theology was a paste job, inadequate to the task at hand: (which was) Fighting so my son could live a life of joy and significance. “ The conventional answers of religion he found– that Jacob’s autism was for the good, or was a mystery, or meant to teach a lesson, or worse, a result of some prior sin, were to be rejected. Rabbi Artson could have turned away in that moment of crisis, finding that what had once brought meaning no longer could. Rather he turned inward-- studying and learning, discovering a more authentic theology that could help him re-vision the human relationship with the Divine, and shed understandings that were no longer right for him. We must challenge ourselves to do the same- to forego the comfortable path if it is no longer authentic. Indeed, God, it is equally as authentic if we reach for You in partnership, rather than subservience; in anger not in obedience; as an impersonal not personal God; as an inspiration but not an intervener in human affairs. We don’t need to affirm You in the image of Sovereign, before whom we must supplicate for favor. We can affirm You in Ruth Brin’s words:

You are the force of motion and light in the universe

You are the strength of life on our planet

You are the power moving us to do good

You are the source of love springing up in us

You are far beyond what we can comprehend.

That is the God many of us sense in the world. We open ourselves up to the possibility that You are not a King, a teacher or a friend, but a force, or... the still, small voice, as we contemplate our lives. Perhaps there is not a "You" we are afraid of disappointing with our behavior in life. Perhaps "You" are the source of personal understanding that helps reflect on who we are and who we have the ability to be.

And so we press ourselves to talk with You differently- not from passivity but from our questions:

Avinu Malkenu: how shall we learn not to live life in vain?

Avinu Malkenu, how shall we get out of our indifference?

Avinu Malkenu, how shall we distinguish between truth and falsehood?

Avinu Malkenu, how shall we find the answers to our questions?

We long for a relationship. But understand: We are 21st century Jews, and we are not quiet, nor obedient. We are defined by our questioning, our challenging, or thinking. And we need your Presence today as much as our ancestors did in their days. We are taught that the reason we say: elohei Avraham, elohei Yitzchak v elohei Yaakov, is that each of our forefathers had a different relationship with you. So do we. We yearn for more conversation, less supplication; more reflection, less contrition. Be our Beloved Partner, be our Guide... be our Source, be Not a Shepherd, be Not a judge, be beyond any human word...help us perfect ourselves and realize our potential- let us encounter You in prayer, let us meet You in study, for learning has always been a path to understand You. Let our prayerbooks be a tool to begin again to make You a living presence in our lives. Inspired in our relationship with You, our goal

is not to sit in sanctuary, but to rise from sanctuary and act in such a way as to bring You into the world by bringing US most fully into the world.

Why is this authenticity so important? Because You call us to do mighty things in the world, and we need inner strength. If there is anything we learned in the last century, it is that obedience is not always the right response of the Jew. For too many Rosh Hashanahs we have read the text of a silent father Abraham binding his son Isaac. We have forgotten to balance that story with the story of an Abraham who raises his voice for justice, who demands that the great Power of the world adhere to the same rules of justice that all humankind has ascribed to --- That is the Torah text we reach for this Rosh Hashanah. We are not quiet Jews, we are Jews who have found our voice, who struggle to know how to use our voice...we struggle to know when, in our crying out, we are actually crying out on behalf of our own needs, or when, as your advocate, we truly are crying out *l'shem hashamayim*, for the sake of Heaven. It is the

Abraham to whom you speak about the impending destruction of Sodom and Gommorah that we turn to this morning for inspiration. First- because it feels right to set aside the binding of Isaac passage and its depiction of master- servant obedience, for a story that models human and God consulting each other, in intimate relationship and in dialogue, challenging each other ethically to serve the greater good- that of righteous behavior. That may more authentically depict the type of relationship the modern Jew seeks with You. We want to turn to You for counsel, with our questions, with our challenges, we seek insight and courage from this relationship. And second, we turn to this story, because indeed it prods us to be the Advocates you call us to be in the world. Abraham worries that innocent people will be swept away with the lawlessness that has overtaken his neighboring towns. We cannot read of this Abraham and not think about the lawlessness in our world today; the villages, the countries in the Middle East, swept under by Isis, the turning of Syria from a repressive regime to a

maniacal regime, the lawlessness that pervades Iraq, and Yemen, the Congo, Sudan and more. We cannot read of Abraham calling out to You about the miscarriage of justice in Sodom and not be charged to speak out about the miscarriage of justice in our own country when young black men are killed regularly, as if their lives didn't matter. And when Abraham asks You if there aren't innocents who are suffering, we can't help but hold images of refugees on boats, on foot, children in their parent's arms, alive and dead. Tens of thousands of people fleeing homes, the greatest mass immigration in 70 years... we must wonder how best can we speak up for just solutions? Abraham unrelenting in giving voice to the questions of justice- and You, source of insight and Guide for him...that is the authentic voice of Yours we need, and the authentic reminder of how a Jew can be in vital, necessary dialogue with You, as we contemplate questions of nuclear weapons, corrupt leaders, an environment degraded beyond repair, and much more. That is not

“dialing it in“ spirituality. That is divine spirituality. Real. Authentic.
Heartfelt.

Eternal One of our people, God of Abraham and Sarah, by our
choice, we are here this Rosh Hashanah. Be near us this day, and
everyday.

Sincerely Yours,

Your People.