



Torah Reflections for Rosh Hashanah

Tishrei, 5781 September 18-20, 2020

Notice the river
at break of dawn—
a braid of streams, creeks, and brooks,
a dance of insects near the shore.

Notice how brackish,
where the river meets the sea,
how with grace the river
hugs the shore—
fierce in its rising,
fiercer when it falls.

Notice it all—
how it bends,
how it tells
the time of year,
and how smooth the boulders are
that guide its course

Notice the Holy One
in blessing and in beauty,
in acts of repair,
in the unearthing of truth,
in eyes that meet,
in the tumult of change,
in words of forgiveness,
in the bridges we build to those we hurt,
in the flow of a year,
in the course of a journey,
in rising and falling,
in the bend of a river,
in the hand we hold out to those who hurt us,
in the life we are living
in blessing and in beauty.

—Sheldon Marder
(from *Mishkan HaLev: Prayers for S'lichot and the Month of Elul*)

Following the dictum of Vincent Van Gogh — “One can never study nature too much and too hard” — this meditation on attentiveness calls us to close observation of the natural world as a way to cultivate spiritual awakening. One who takes time to watch and listen carefully — who is not afraid of silence and solitary reflection — can open the heart to wonder and gratitude, a sustained awareness of the Divine. When we perceive the Holy Presence “in the life we are living,” and in our own acts of reconciliation and healing, the promise of forgiveness becomes real for us.

At the heart of this season’s prayers of forgiveness (*S’lichot*) is the Biblical passage Exodus 34:6-7:

“*Adonai, Adonai*—

Holy One, compassionate, gracious, endlessly patient, loving, and true;
showing mercy to the thousandth generation;
forgiving evil, defiance, and wrongdoing; granting pardon.”

Our Sages saw in these two verses thirteen aspects (*midot* or qualities) of divine compassion. The Talmud (*Rosh Hashanah* 17b) explains the repetition of God’s name (*Adonai*) thus: *Adonai* extends mercy before we do wrong, and *Adonai* responds with mercy when we repent after wrongdoing. Compassionate forbearance allows the relationship to continue — a lesson in forgiveness that we might emulate in our own relationships.

Various paths can lead us from Elul to spiritual awakening and revitalized relationships in the coming new year: heightened attentiveness to nature and to the people around us, spiritual or theological reflection, Torah study, meditation and prayer.

As we follow our personal paths into the year 5781, may we find within us deep wellsprings of kindness and gratitude, love and forgiveness.

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Sheldon Marder, a member of the BAJHC Board of Directors, who recently retired as rabbi of San Francisco Campus for Jewish Living. Gracious support is provided by the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.