In a small town in a quaint synagogue, the rabbi kept an empty chair on the bimah every Yom Kippur. When asked why, the rabbi said, "It's for God. In case God decides to show up." One year, a child asked, "But what if God doesn't come?" The rabbi replied, "Then we must ask ourselves, *did we?" Tonight is about looking in the mirror and seeing if and how we show up.*

People worry about their acceptance in the Jewish community without a belief in God. But I am here to tell you a secret. Look around. Not everyone here believes in God. Judaism does not require you to. Some do, and some adamantly do not, and others struggle with the question: Does God exist?

I am an unapologetic God person. I believe deeply in the existence of God and religion, and when terrible things happen, my beliefs don't diminish; they tend to deepen.

It is often in the darkest moments of our lives that our faith is challenged. Where was God during the holocaust? During the pandemic? During Oct 7th? During an illness, or after the loss of a loved one?

There are moments in history so dark, so devastating, that they seem to eclipse the very presence of God. The Holocaust is one such moment. Six million Jews murdered. Communities erased. Faith shattered. And the question that echoes through generations: "Where was God?"

Some survivors, like Elie Wiesel, bore witness to the horror and still asked that question aloud. In Night, Wiesel recounts watching a child hanged in Auschwitz. Someone behind him asks, "Where is God now?" And Wiesel writes, "And I heard a voice within me answer him: 'Where is God? Here God is, God is hanging here on this gallow.'" This is not a theological answer that resolves the pain. It is a cry of anguish that dares to imagine a God who suffers with us. A God who does not intervene, but who is present in the suffering itself.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of a "man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." In Jewish theology, this has been interpreted by some as a vision of a God who does not stand above history, but enters into it. Who weeps with us. Who mourns with us. Who, in the words of Rabbi Shapira, the Piaseczno Rebbe, continued to teach Torah in the Warsaw Ghetto until he was murdered. "Even in the flames, God is with us."

This idea of divine presence in suffering is not meant to explain the Holocaust. Nothing can. But it offers a path for those who still seek God in the ashes. **Not a God of**

answers, but a God of empathy. A God who was with our people in the camps, in the forests, in the ghettos. A God who, like us, was broken. And yet, from that brokenness, our people rebuilt. Not because they understood God's ways, but because they refused to let the silence be the end of the story.

In the face of suffering, Judaism does not offer easy answers. Instead, it offers a calling. We are not a tradition that turns away from pain. We wrestle with it. We name it. And then we act.

If the Holocaust forced us to ask where God was in the silence, the pandemic invited us to ask where God might be in the stillness.

When the world shut down, when sanctuaries were empty and hospital wards were full, we found ourselves asking again: "Where is God?"

We remember the cover of the NY Times with all the names lost to COVID. We remember with terror watching the virus spread worldwide, unable to figure out its contagion, we remember locking ourselves away and watching mobile morgues set up in Central Park. So many asked where God was when first responders who were without protective equipment perished. When our most vulnerable: the young, the sick, the old, kept dying.

And perhaps the answer came not in thunder or fire, but in the quiet. In the breath of the mourner who whispered goodbye over FaceTime. In the hands of the healer who held a stranger's hand when family couldn't be there. In the nurse who stayed past her shift. In the chaplain who prayed through a mask. In the neighbor who left groceries on a doorstep.

We saw God in the Zoom shiva, where grief was shared across screens. In the masked embrace of a friend who showed up anyway. In the extraordinary ways people helped each other, sewing masks, delivering meals, checking in on the elderly, singing from balconies.

And it wasn't just during the pandemic. Despite all the movies you may have seen of natural disasters turning people into aggressive monsters, most research shows that disasters bring people together. In the immediate aftermath of a hurricane or earthquake, most people overwhelmingly come to the aid of their neighbors. And in those moments, we might say, "God is in the showing up."

I have seen this in our own congregation, beautiful acts of faith and resilience in the face of suffering. This room overflowed on October 9, 2023. Parents who show up to services week after week, whose children have died of illness, depression, war or antisemitism.

And what of these last two years, the challenge of finding God when we see senseless violence in our most sacred places? What about when we feel abandoned by our neighbors or our friends? On October 7th, when innocent Israeli citizens, families, children, babies, were brutally attacked, I found myself losing faith. Not in God, but in people: Where were the moral voices in Gaza? While these horrific acts were being meticulously planned, where were the people who could have said, “no”? This question echoes through history. It echoes through the Holocaust, where we ask not only about divine silence, but about human silence. Where were the nations? Where were the good neighbors? Where were the moral voices? Have mistakes been made along the way? Of course, they have, but I want you to ask yourself tonight about your role. How do we find God’s presence in this time of hatred and fear?

I find my heroes in many of those who were taken hostage on October 7th. Israeli hostage Shem Tov was a secular Israeli before October 7th. Shem and his family had never been observant until the care-free, twenty-year-old was taken from the Nova music festival and held captive for 505 days.

There in the pitch black of the Hamas tunnels, Shem made a vow to God. Every single day he was held hostage, he prayed. Waiting for him to come home, his mother also prayed for him, sometimes they miraculously recited the same psalm. The ancient words connected even when they could not see each other, hear each other, even when Shem’s fate was uncertain. They each recited Psalm 20: *May God answer you in times of trouble.* As his days as a hostage stretched on, Shem began to bless his food. He told a journalist after being released, “You are looking for something to lean on… The first place I went to was God.”

Shem was not the only hostage to turn to God. Eli Sharabi, who was kept in a dark tunnel, starving, for 491 days, often recited the *Sh’ma* and made *Kiddush*, using water in place of wine. He was inspired by another hostage, Hersh Goldberg-Polin.

Hersh had a motto that he taught other captives. This motto was not inspired by a psalm, but came from Holocaust Survivor Viktor Frankl. Frankl was an atheist. He followed the work of Nietzsche, but still, he found meaning to sustain himself through the trauma of the Holocaust. His core belief: “*He who has a why can bear with any how.*” In the lightless tunnels, these are the words Hersh repeated to Eli. Together, they

drew strength from their ancestors, from both religious Jews and atheist Jews, to find the hope, the prayer, that they needed to sustain their souls.

Hersh did not survive captivity, and while Eli was freed, he lost his wife and children. Still, Eli endures: he has tattooed this maxim on his arm: *He who has a why can bear any how*. Even now, survivor Shem prays daily, continuing to lean on his faith in the aftermath of his captivity. (Info on Shem/Eli from NYT.)

Through these small acts: making *Kiddush* over water, inspiring each other, praying, holding on to meaning, this is our Jewish resilience. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel once said, “God is not always in the answer. Sometimes, God is in the question. And sometimes, God is in the response.”

It is in us not only to survive, but to act. Not only to call out, but to respond. We rise with purpose because when we have a why, we can bear any how. We look to God, and we hope to find ourselves more whole.

So we ask: Did we find God in the quiet? In the courage? In the kindness? Maybe God was never absent. Maybe God was in us all along. Even in the flames. Even in the isolation of a global pandemic. Even in the darkness of Hamas tunnels. Even when we couldn’t or wouldn’t believe, even then, we were not alone.

In the face of horror, pandemics, wars, we are reminded that God’s presence in the world is often mediated through us. Through our choices. Through our courage. Through our compassion. And yes, when we feel attacked, it is hard to have compassion. It is hard to not choose a side and stick to it. The images of Israel and Gaza assail us every day. How do we reach out for God’s presence in a time of such suffering? How do we look to our ancestors to help us find that courageous response?

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, after marching with Dr. King in Selma, said, “I felt my legs were praying.” That is our theology in action. We are God’s hands in the world. When someone is hungry, we feed them. When someone is grieving, we sit beside them. When someone is in danger, we show up. We saw this during the pandemic and natural disasters. When floodwaters rise, people form human chains to pull each other to safety. When wildfires rage, strangers risk their lives to knock on doors and carry others out.

These are not just acts of heroism; they are acts of holiness. In those moments, we don’t ask “Where is God?” We say: “Here is God, in the hands that reach out, in the voices that speak up, in the hearts that refuse to turn away.”

When tragedy strikes, the Jewish response is not only to ask “Where was God?” but to ask a deeper, more haunting question: “Where were we?”

This is the Jewish response to suffering: not to retreat into despair, but to rise with purpose. To be the answer to someone else’s prayer. To be the presence of God in a broken world. We learn in Judaism that when God created the world, God’s light was too magnificent to be contained in vessels. The vessels shattered, and it's up to us to go around the earth and collect the shattered fragments to “Tikkun Olam” our world. To repair it and put it back the way it was supposed to be. Where are *we* in this divine task?

The question that echoes through history and heartbreak: Where is God? Is not the question we should ask. The more urgent question is: Where are we? What are we going to do?

The High Holy Day season only makes these questions reverberate louder. We have imagery of coming before God on a throne with a scale and the open Book of Life as God weighs our good deeds and misses, to see if, through repentance, good deeds and charity, our decree will be less severe. We come before God, and we speak, we pray and we act.

In the face of suffering, silence is not an option. In the face of injustice, indifference is not neutral. And in the face of rising antisemitism, distorted narratives and moral confusion, we must not sleep through these challenging times. And these are extremely challenging times. So many of us are worried. Wondering what will happen next. What our strategy will be.

Much in life is about relationships, who you know, who you trust, and who trusts you in return. As a community, we are blessed with leaders who have built deep, enduring relationships with influential Jewish organizations across the country and the world. I am continuously surprised by our community and its national visibility. Many of you serve on national and international boards. You have access to officials who will listen because of the trust you’ve earned. So many of you tell me courageous stories of making a difference locally, by calling the school when a tennis tournament is scheduled on a Jewish Holy Day, educating co-workers when they use a derogatory saying without knowing it. Sticking up for Judaism and Israel when friends or family make egregious statements.

We are in a position to ensure that the voice of our community, and of truth, is heard.

As the war in Gaza continues, we are witnessing a global campaign that vilifies Israel and distorts reality. The suffering of Palestinian children is real and heartbreaking, the situation is extremely complicated. The tide is turning. Antisemitism is rising.

We say “Never Again.” But what are we *doing* this moment to ensure that this is the case?
This is our call to action. To be God’s hands in the world. To speak truth with compassion. To stand up with moral clarity. To demand more from our allies and our institutions. To push back against falsehoods. To reaffirm Israel’s right to self-defense. To feed the hungry and to bring home our hostages.
To combat the dangerous surge of antisemitism in our schools, on our streets, on our screens, and around the world.
We must be the ones who show up. Who speak out. Who lead.
So when we ask, “Where are you?”, let our answer be:
Hineni.
Here I am.
I will not be silent.
I will not be still.
I will be the presence of God in a broken world.
Let us carry this question with us, not to solve it, but to live it.
To let it shape our choices, our courage, and our compassion.
And may we find, in our asking, that God is not far away.
God is here.
In our hands.
In our voices.
In our resolve.
Ken yehi ratzon.
May it be so.