

A man was going from village to village, everywhere asking the same question, "where can I find God?" He journeyed from Rabbi to Rabbi, and nowhere was he satisfied with the answers he received, so quickly he would pack his bags, and hurry on to the next village. Some of the Rabbis replied, "Pray, my son, and you shall find Him". But the man had tried to pray, and knew that he could not.

And some replied, "Forget your quest, my child, God is within you". But the man had tried to find God within himself, and failed.

One day, the man arrived, very wearily, at a very small village set in the middle of an enormous forest. He went up to a woman who was minding some chickens, and she asked whom could he be looking for in such a small place, but she did not seem surprised when he told her that he was looking for God. She showed him to the Rabbi's house.

When he went in, the Rabbi was studying, so he waited a moment, but he was impatient to be off to the next village, if he could not be satisfied, so he interrupted, "Rabbi - how do I find God?"

The Rabbi paused, and the man wondered which of the many answers he had already received would he be told this time. But the Rabbi simply said, "You have come to the right place, my child. God is in this village. Why don't you stay a few days; you might meet Him".

The man was puzzled. He did not understand what the Rabbi could mean. But the answer was unusual, and so he stayed. For two or three days, he strode round and round, asking all the villagers where God was that morning, but they would only smile, and ask him to have a meal with them. Gradually, he got to know them, and even helped with some of the village work. Every now and then he would see the Rabbi by chance, and the Rabbi would ask him, "Have you met God yet, my son?"

And the man would smile, and sometimes he understood and sometimes he did not understand. For months he stayed in the village, and then for years. He became part of the village and shared in all its life. He went with the men to the synagogue on Friday and prayed with the rest of them, and sometimes he knew why he prayed, and sometimes he didn't. And sometimes he really said prayers, and sometimes only words. And then he would return with one of the men for a Friday night meal, and when they talked about God, he was always assured that God was in the village, though he wasn't quite sure where or when He could be found. Gradually, too, he began to believe that God was in the village, though he wasn't quite sure where. He knew, however, that sometimes he had met Him.

One day, for the first time, the Rabbi came to him and said, "You have met God now, have you not?"

And the man said, "Thank you, Rabbi, I think that I have. But I am not sure why I met Him, or how or when. And why is He in this village only?"

So the Rabbi replied, "God is not a person, my child, nor a thing. You cannot meet Him in that way. When you came to our village, you were so worried by your question that you could not recognize an answer when you heard it. Nor could you recognize God when you met Him, because you were not really looking for Him. Now that you have stopped persecuting God, you have found Him, and now you can return to your town if you wish".

So the man went back to his town, and God went with him. And the man enjoyed studying and praying, and he knew that God was within himself and within other people. And other people knew it too, and sometimes they would ask him, "Where can we find God?"

And the man would always answer, "You have come to the right spot: God is in this place".

(Rabbi Jeffrey Newman, in Returning, J. Magonet ed., RSGB)

Like the man in the story, many of us find that the search for God is difficult. For some, it may even seem as though the search is never-ending. Often, it is a life-long pursuit. And yet here we are, assembled together at the beginning of another New Year, searching for God, calling out to God to heal our wounds, forgive our trespasses and return us once again to God's loving and compassionate embrace.

In our story, the man finds God through engagement in community, even though he is not sure exactly how or when. It happens, somewhat mysteriously, when he lets go of his quest and simply takes part in the everyday activities of the village...working alongside the others, sharing in meals, in conversation and in prayer. I want to suggest to you on this Erev Rosh Hashanah that it is true for us as well. One way to find God is to engage in Jewish communal life, and in particular, to engage in the life of the synagogue.

Over the past seven weeks, Ricki and I have had the opportunity to meet most of you in gatherings at people's homes or here at the synagogue, and at these gatherings we have listened as you shared with us your strong sense of connection and commitment to Beth Israel Judea, as well as some of your hopes and dreams for the shul in the years that we will share together. I, too, have hopes and dreams for BIJ, and I would like to share some of them with you this evening.

The synagogue is the central institution in Jewish religious life. In modern Hebrew, the synagogue is called "*kehillah kedoshah*", a "holy community". Complimented by religious life in the Jewish home, it is the guardian of Jewish continuity and growth. In our tradition, the synagogue is known by three other names: *Beit Midrash.*, *Beit T'fillah* and *Beit Knesset*.

As *Beit Midrash (a House of Study)* the synagogue is meant to be a place of learning for Jews of all ages—from pre-schoolers to those of later years. Formal learning opportunities, adult and family education, individual study, residential retreats, summer kallah and travel to Israel are all part of the variety of opportunities that can make the synagogue a dynamic place of learning. Opportunities to learn through music and the arts, through spiritual exploration and religious experience can also be a part of the life-long learning that can be found in the synagogue. A primary role of the rabbi is to teach, and those who engage in the life of this synagogue will find many opportunities to learn with me...as well as opportunities to learn from the lives and varied experiences of other synagogue members. I hope that we will develop a dynamic program of learning, including retreat programs, scholar-in-residence weekends, and a BIJ Israel Tour, about which I will speak in greater detail on Yom Kippur.

As *Bet T'fillah (a House of Prayer)* the synagogue is meant to be a place filled with the joy of worship and blessing. I believe that music is the key to warmth and participation in communal worship, and we are blessed with a chazzan, a High Holy Day choir, and members of the congregation who bring the beautiful sounds of music to our services. (I sing a little bit, too...) It is important to find ways to make all aspects of worship and ritual equally accessible to all members of the congregation, and we do this at Beth Israel Judea through egalitarianism in language and ritual. We offer our Shabbat and holiday worship in a variety of styles and settings, in order to be inclusive of families with young children and to address the special needs and interests of individuals...and we also make use of assistive devices like the internet. You will notice a camera near the back of the room which is live-streaming this service to the homes of members of the congregation who are homebound and unable to join us here in the Bet Tefillah. They are watching this service on their home computers, and we welcome them to our service. I hope that we will continue to expand the menu of worship experiences to include Shabbat services in some of the neighborhoods where clusters of our members live, and perhaps an occasional Havdalah service in members' homes or at the beach.

As *Beit Knesset (a House of Communal Assembly)* the synagogue is meant to be a truly caring community. Respectful of the needs of others, a synagogue becomes a *kehillah kedoshah* [holy community] when it serves as an extended family to its members—welcoming of others, tolerant of individual differences, affirming of each person's value—and when it offers a variety of social, cultural, Zionist, and *tikkun olam* programming. I believe that the synagogue is at its best when it is a cooperative venture in which the values of volunteerism are upheld and acknowledged by its members, and when it functions as a truly democratic institution in which rabbi and congregation work in sacred partnership to deliver programs and services and to determine the directions for its future. I hope to see renewed growth of the congregation, as we extend our warm welcome to new families and re-engage former members and current members who have been on the periphery for awhile.

Like the man in our story, I have travelled from village to village, and now I have settled here. I accepted the call to this bimah, because I believe that Beth Israel Judea can be the *kehillah kedoshah* that I have been talking about. With your participation and engagement, we can work together to fulfil this vision for our synagogue and our community.

In my going from village to village, I was looking for a community in which the atmosphere and the style of the congregation would speak to me in a warm and welcoming manner, one in which there is joy of spirit in worship and celebration. I hoped to find a congregation that is blessed with good leadership, one that holds out a genuine sense of partnership; a place where everyone—young and old—is a valued member of the community; a place where God dwells; a place where Jews learn and celebrate and pray. Beth Israel Judea is such a place. It calls out to me and I hope that it calls out to you as well.

Let us begin tonight, at the start of this New Year 5772, to reaffirm our commitment to BIJ as a *kehillah kedoshah*. We may not know exactly how or when it happens, but I believe that we will meet God here, for indeed, God is in this place.

*Ken Yihi Ratzon.*