

**You Are Unique**  
**Rosh Hashanah 5784**

Rabbi Esther Adler

Mount Zion Temple

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I have this friend...In her first year of rabbinic school she came upon a Hassidic story about a certain Rabbi Zusya. The story goes that before his death Rabbi Zusya began to tremble with fear. His disciples asked why, and he said, "in the world to come I will not be asked "why were you not Abraham, or why were you not Moses. I tremble because I will be asked "why were you not Zusya?"

My friend, when she heard this story, laughed to herself, and thought "forget about Moses...I'm not even Zusya!" Obviously, I - I mean - she - missed the point. Or maybe she really did get the point, but it was just a little too sharp, and prodded a little too deep. You see, even though my friend understood that Zusya's message was that it's okay not to be Moses, that you should just be yourself as best you can, she wasn't convinced. Sure, it's okay not to be Moses -- if you're Zusya, that is.

But what if you're just a rabbinic student and everyone else has their shabbat sermons typed and memorized by Wednesday and here it is Friday morning and you haven't got a clue? Or if the other people at work never have a single paper on their desk and you can't even find your phone under the piles? Or if you can't even find work?

How is it that your sister-in-law's house is always white glove clean, and your neighbor's lawn looks like it was mowed with manicure scissors? How are other retired friends out there seeing the world, and you find it hard just to get out of the house? And what if your kids are struggling, or you have depression? And how is it that everybody else seems to be so active and so successful and so popular and so organized and so thin and so happy, and so on. If you're any of those people, or practically anyone at all, for that matter, it can be pretty easy to feel inadequate, to sit around wishing you were Moses, or Zusya, or even your next-door neighbor.

We learn early on in school to contrast and compare, which often leaves us wanting. We look around us at the best and the brightest, and try to be as good, as bright as them, forgetting the goodness and brightness that is our own.

Even the Jewish tradition, usually so wise, teaches us to compare. There is a popular midrash which praises Noah as righteous in his own wicked generation but compared to Abraham, Noah's just a guy with a boat. I think Rabbi Zusya was trying to correct this rather unconstructive teaching when he said "I won't be asked why I wasn't Moses..."

This story about Rabbi Zusya always seems to resurface as we approach the High Holy Days. My friend can relate to all those people I described a few minutes ago, wishing they were as good as, or as successful as, or as creative as, or as involved as, or as nurturing as, the Abrahams and Moseses, the Sarahs and Miriams we see around us. Maybe you can relate too?

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This is when we need to remember Rabbi Zusya, and invite him to the party. In essence, Zusya is a story about judgment, and Rosh Hashanah is called *Yom Hadin*, the day on which we sit in judgment before God. One of the key prayers of Rosh Hashanah service is the Unetaneh Tokef: tomorrow we will recite:

*Unetanneh tokef k'dushat hayom...*

Let us declare the awesome power of this day...

On Rosh Hashanah it is written

and on Yom Kippur it is sealed

who shall live and who shall die...

And so on with a litany of the fates which could await us. It ends with the reminder that *Teshuva, Tefilah, and Tzedaka* avert a severe decree. In other words, our choices matter. And so, on Rosh Hashanah we begin in earnest the 10-day period of reflection and self-examination ending in Yom Kippur; today we start asking the difficult questions about who we really are. So, it seems all those doubts and concerns I was talking about are appropriate, if painful, for this day.

Maybe we should compare ourselves to those amazing people we see all around us on this day. Maybe inadequate is exactly what we **should** be feeling. Then God might accept our contrition and inscribe us for blessing.

I don't think so. Rabbi Zusya is telling us that there is a difference, an essential difference, between self-examination and self-deprecation, between humility and inferiority. Rosh Hashanah is for exploring who we are, not for beating ourselves up over who we aren't. Judging ourselves by unfair standards amounts to abuse, and I don't think that's what God wants from us on these days. In fact, I think God would find it offensive.

It is an offense to God because it is an insult to God's dearest creation, the only one created in God's own image. Another story: before Adam and Eve were created, it was rumored among the angels that the new humans would be created through God's own breath, and in God's own image. Jealous, the angels conspired to hide the divine image so that it would be concealed from these new creatures.

One of the angels suggested that the divine image be buried deep in the ocean -- the humans couldn't swim -- they'd never find it. Another suggested the highest mountain top. But the wiliest angel had a better plan: Hide the divine image in the humans themselves. It is the last place they will ever look for it." "And God created humanity in the divine image, in the image of Godliness...Male and female God created them. And God blessed them."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:27

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I think this is one of the most important lessons Judaism has to teach us, and worth thinking about for a few minutes, especially as we search our souls during this season. What does it mean to be created in the image of God?

The first time I remember ever really thinking about God was when I was about fifteen. I distinctly remember two lines of a poem I wrote for our Confirmation service. I remember nothing else of the poem, and little else of Confirmation, but these two lines have stayed with me over the years:

God is a feeling, deep inside us all,  
a very special feeling, which helps us stand up tall.

It's cheesy, I know, and I still believe it. It expresses the same notion as the story about the angels, that as we search for God, the first place we must look is inside ourselves. The search for God and the search for self are intimately connected. Faith in ourselves can lead to faith in God, and vice versa.

According to Rabbi Akiva, God showed great love for humanity by creating us in the divine image, and even greater love by letting us know it<sup>2</sup>. This knowledge challenges us with the responsibility to seek out just what in each of us reflects the divine, and to express it to its fullest potential.

By exploring what we believe about God, we may learn something about ourselves as well. The first thing the Jew learns about God is, of course, that God is ONE - that is, absolutely unique. Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. Daily we repeat these words affirming the oneness of the Holy One, and so reflect in the mirror of our souls our own holy oneness. Our image in that mirror is nothing less than the image of God.

"God never does the same thing twice," said Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav.<sup>3</sup> Every person born into this world represents something new, something entirely unique, that never existed before, and will never be repeated. The Hassidim taught that it is the duty of every person to know and consider that they are unique, that there has never been anyone like them in the whole world. For if there had been someone the same, there would be no need for them to be in the world. Every single person is new and original, and is called upon to fulfill their particularity in the world.<sup>4</sup> We each have a role to play which is ours and ours alone.

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<sup>2</sup> Pirkei Avot 3:18

<sup>3</sup> Sichot HaRan 54

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, [The Way of Man According to the Teachings of Hasidism](http://www.maaber.org/issue_february09/spiritual_traditions1_e.htm), Citadel Press.  
[http://www.maaber.org/issue\\_february09/spiritual\\_traditions1\\_e.htm](http://www.maaber.org/issue_february09/spiritual_traditions1_e.htm)

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It is difficult at times to rejoice in our uniqueness, to remember that everyone has inside something precious that is in no one else. Yet our differences attest to God's creativity. Only by affirming those differences, by each striving to know our particular reason, says Rabbi Nachman, can we bring redemption to ourselves and our world.

Another important attribute of God is that, in fact, there are many different attributes of God. There is diversity within the unity which is God. For example, the rabbis often speak of the relationship between Midat haDin - the attribute of justice and Midat haRachamim - the attribute of mercy. In another midrash about creation, God says "If I create the world with mercy only, sin will run rampant. If I create it only with justice, there may be too much pain. So I will create it with both and I hope that it will endure." <sup>5</sup>

And, says the midrash, in the hour when the Jews take up their shofarot...God moves from the throne of judgment to the throne of mercy, and is filled with compassion for them...<sup>6</sup> My point is, that like God, each of us is multifaceted. Discovering the divine in us means exploring all our different sides, even those which lay dormant or hidden, even those which lead us down unknown and frightening paths.

I'd like to bring up one more implication of being created in the divine image, which we will read about on Yom Kippur. We are commanded in Leviticus "*Kedoshim t'hiyu, Be holy, for I, Adonai your God am holy.*"<sup>7</sup> This is our imperative to act on what is the best in us. Holiness is our individual creative power to realize good in the world.

Martin Buber said, "God wants not to be believed in by us, but to be realized in us." <sup>8</sup> This is our task here on earth - to bring God's presence to everything we do, indeed, to recognize God's presence in who we are.

Perhaps the command to be holy, to live into the divine image, is part of why it's so much easier to focus on our inadequacies than on our capacities, why it's easier to hear chastisements on Rosh Hashanah than to be told that Godliness is buried in us. Perhaps we blind ourselves to our virtues because we fear what will happen once we recognize the divine in us. Once we admit that we "can," we will be forced to admit that we "must."

It takes courage to feel good about ourselves, to declare our goodness, to reveal the secret of the divine image locked in the untapped depths of our being. Yet it is only when girded with

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<sup>5</sup> Genesis Rabbah 12:15

<sup>6</sup> Leviticus Rabbah 29:3

<sup>7</sup> Leviticus 19:2

<sup>8</sup> Martin Buber, *On Judaism*, Schocken 1972

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this courage and this strength that we can go about the business of true self-assessment and repentance.

It's not so different from sitting down with our supervisor for a performance review. What is discussed first? Our strengths, our value to the work community, the ways in which we enhance our company or institution. Only then is there talk about what is more difficult for us to hear – the ways in which we need to improve, areas of limitation, need for further growth. Knowing that we are valued and that we have done good things makes it easier to accept the more critical parts of the evaluation.<sup>9</sup>

So the task ahead of us for the next ten days is twofold, and is illustrated by another bit of Hassidic wisdom: Rabbi Simha Bunam used to say that we should always keep two truths in our pockets. In the left pocket we should keep the words "for my sake the world was created. And in the right one, "I am but dust and ashes."<sup>10</sup>

To ignore what's in the right pocket would lead to conceit and selfishness. On these Holy Days, and every other day as well, we must be aware of those things in ourselves which need improvement. This is the season of Teshuva - of looking at the past year and repenting for all the good which we could have accomplished and didn't: For not giving enough tzedakah, or being too busy to volunteer, for not calling our families, or forgetting to say, "I love you." None of us is perfect; we all can do better.

But to stand before God in judgment on Rosh Hashanah and not remember "for my sake the world was created," is to disregard the divine potential in us and actually prevents us from true, honest Teshuva. If we cannot recognize what our unique and true potential is, how can we ask ourselves whether we have fulfilled it or not? Unless Zusya really knows what it means to be Zusya, he cannot answer why he was not Zusya. All he can do is wonder why he was not Moses.

True Teshuva is about returning to the best that is in us, not trying to turn into someone else. As we begin this Rosh Hashanah day, and this season of Teshuvah, I urge you to remember that you are created in the Divine Image. That you are entirely unique, and have a purpose that is entirely your own. And that at the end of the day you will not be compared to Zusya, or Moses, or Miriam or anyone else. The only question that will matter is did you live up to who you were meant to be. Because, said Rabbi Nachman, "The day you were born is the day God decided that the world could not live without you."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.mayimrabim.org/our-rabbi/rabbi-stiefels-monthly-article>

<sup>10</sup> in Martin Buber, *Tales of the Hassidim* (Later Masters)

<sup>11</sup> I have not been able to find an original source for this quote.

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One of my favorite phrases that shows up throughout our Tanach is *Hazak V'ematz* - Be strong and of good courage. That is my prayer for us during these holy days. May God grant each of us the courage to see ourselves for who we were born to be, and the strength to live up to it each and every day.

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