

98765From the Rabbi's Desk
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God Has Faith in You! Don't Let Him Down!
D'var Torah for the First Morning of Rosh Hashanah
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To us, a sunset is ordinary. We might call it pretty, but we rarely think twice about a cycle we've seen thousands of times. But to Adam, the very first sunset was terrifying.

After spending his first day basking in the warmth of the sun, he watched it sink into the western horizon. Darkness took over. An ancient Jewish tradition tells us that Adam spent his first night weeping in absolute terror, convinced the sun was dead and gone forever.

Only when the eastern sky blushed with dawn did he realize the fundamental law of our world: the sun that sets will always rise. While he was likely still anxious on his second night, each new morning brought reassurance. Eventually, the miracle became mundane, and Adam took it for granted.

Something similar happens to us.

Every night we go to sleep, and every morning we wake up without giving it too much thought. It happened yesterday, it happened today, and it will happen tomorrow...

In traditional Judaism, however, being alive every morning is not taken for granted. As soon as a Jew opens his or her eyes, he or she must say the following:

מודה אני לפניך מלך חי וקים, שהחזרת בי נשמתی בחמלה. רבך אמונתך.

I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.

Modeh Ani is the traditional Jewish morning prayer of gratitude. It is recited immediately upon waking up, even before getting out of bed, to thank God for restoring our soul.

Modeh Ani places gratitude as the very first thought of your day, acknowledging life as a renewed gift. *You have mercifully restored my soul within me.* You, God, have given me another day of life, and I don't take it for granted.

The last words of the *Modeh Ani* are, however, puzzling. What does it mean רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ - *Your faithfulness is great*? Whose faithfulness? Aren't we supposed to affirm our faithfulness in God? What does it mean that God's faithfulness is great? And what is the connection with us waking up in the morning?

In order to answer this question, I need to go back to a central idea in Jewish thought, one that is so important that I have shared it with you on countless occasions; an idea that is so important that it is worth going over it one more time.

*Every human being has a distinct role to play in the world. Every human being has a particular mission, one that only she or he can realize. Every individual is unique, and her or his role in the world is irreplaceable.*¹

Christians refer to this unique mission as *your calling*. They would ask, "Manes, when did you find 'your calling'?" Although the expression may not sound very Jewish, *I would like to invite you to "reflect upon the deep Jewish roots of the quest for a life of personal mission.*

The notion of personal calling is grounded in the creation story itself. In the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, humans are created "in the image of God." ... While every other living species is formed in multitudes, the Mishnah notes that God's creation of humanity starts with a single person, Adam. The Sages (Mishna Sanhedrin 4;5) hold that this particular aspect of creation signifies the miracle of human uniqueness: "For man stamps out many coins with one seal, and they are all alike,

¹ Hoffman, David: Living into the Mission of Our Lives. In: <https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/living-into-the-mission-of-our-lives>.

*but the Holy One stamped each person with the seal of Adam, and not one of them is like another. Therefore, every person is obligated to say, 'The world was created for me.' If each and every human being is radically unique, then each and every human being is uniquely responsible for fulfilling a unique mission in the world, one that only he or she can accomplish... Living a life of purpose is a profoundly Jewish quest, grounded in the wisdom of the Jewish tradition, a tradition that teaches us that the world is imperfect and in need of repair. Humans are called to serve as God's agents to repair the world, beginning with the self.*²

Now we can go back to *Modeh Ani*. What does *רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ* - *Your faithfulness, God, is great* mean?

What it means is that God has faith in us. God has faith that you, and you, and I, will fulfill, or at least start working on, the unique mission we have in this world. Each of us was created with a purpose. The fact that we wake up every morning is an indication that we still have work to do, that God is expecting something from us.

The phrase "Your faithfulness is great" (*רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ*) at the end of the *Modeh Ani* means that God deeply trusts in us. It declares that God has immense faith in us to carry out our purpose. God "believes" in us and entrusts our souls back to our body. When we sleep, our soul rests. Waking up means God decided our work on earth is not done. God treats every new morning as proof that the world still needs each of us.

Even more, *Modeh Ani* finishes the first thought of our day before any mistakes or worries of yesterday can crowd our mind. Even before we say a formal prayer or wash our hands, we are given a clean slate and divine confidence.

"Your faithfulness is great." God has enough faith in me that today I will make my life worth His while, that I will be where I need to be.

And, if a single day shows God's trust in us, imagine a whole new year ahead, a year with the possibility of new resolutions, with the potential of partnering with God in making His world a better place for all of us.

If every morning is a gift, a present, imagine a year full of presents, full of opportunities.

² Berkun, Lauren: <https://www.hartman.org.il/high-holy-days-living-with-purpose>.

The liturgical composition *Unetane Tokef* speaks of a book, open in front of God, written and sealed with our past actions.

I would like to suggest a different book, a book with blank pages, ready to be written by us.

God has faith in you; in the beautiful story you will write this year! Don't let him down!

...

Master of the Universe...

מודה אני לפניך מלך חי וקיים, שהחזרת בי נשמת בְּחֵמְלָה. רַבָּה אֲמוּנָתְךָ.

I offer thanks to You, living and eternal King, for You have mercifully restored my soul within me; Your faithfulness is great.

Thank you for believing in me, God. Thank you for the chance of a fresh start. I know a book lies open in front of you, a book that contains all my past mistakes, setbacks, and disappointments. I own them, dear God, but please give me another opportunity. Open a different book for me, a book with blank pages, a book in which I can write a better version of myself.

God of new opportunities; we pray for a better year ahead, for us and for all our loved ones; for our fragmented country, our wounded State of Israel, and our broken world; we pray for a year of peace and contentment, a year of joy and plenty, a year of meaning and hope, a good and sweet year.

And please, keep believing in us, God; we won't let You down.