Welcome to our holy sanctuary - the Gym! This is the most holy time of our year and we are in a gym. How do we make the holy exercise of prayer and connection stretch in this space? Is God here? Do you believe in God? Does it matter for mundane interactions if you believe in God? Well, what does it mean to believe in God? To believe that there is a supernal being named God that has power over our universe and our lives or is to believe to feel God’s effects and presence in certain moments of existence? Is it a “knowing” or a “feeling”? ”Do you believe in God?” is an awkward question. Partly because the questioner is often uncomfortable with how they themselves would answer, but also because the words are loaded with prejudicial doubt. Like something more trifling or faddish, like magic or science fiction. The truth is I don’t have an easy answer for that uneasy question. But I’m certain I feel God, and confront God and challenge God. I believe I am in search with God.

When I listen to a piece of beautiful music I feel my eyes fill with tears. Do you believe in music? I feel the music, how the sounds and sometimes the words touch my heart and fill my body so much so that the feelings overflow out and into tears. I cannot prove the feeling of music, but I can share my experience enjoying it. Do you believe in prayer? Davening in my favorite shul in Jerusalem, women surrounding me and men at a distance, gazing out onto the old city as our ancient words of prayer are thrumming in my heart - I was surely in the presence of God. In all of these moments I could feel God but not because I believe God is in the moment, rather I can explain and share how I felt enlightened and overtaken by something greater than what I believe my own, otherwise independent soul, to be capable of. In the siddur Mishkan Tefilah there is a beautiful meditation that reads: “I find by experience, not by reasoning, but by my own discovery that God is near me, and I can be near God at all times. I cannot explain it, but I am as sure of my experience as I am of the fact that I live and love. I cannot explain how I have come to live and love, but I know I do. In the same way, I know that, I am in contact with God.”

Experience, not reasoning, resulting in contact with God. In the Talmud, in Berakhot we come across a story of contact with God in the most expected of ways, prayer, and the most unique of reasonings. Rabbi Yosi was walking along the road and entered the rubble of a building near
the ruins of Jerusalem in order to pray. The Prophet Elijah came and guarded the entrance of the building until Rabbi Yosi had finished praying. When he was done, Elijah asked, “Why did you enter these ruins?” Rabbi Yosi responded, “to pray,” and Elijah retorted, “you should have prayed on the road.” Rabbi Yosi said, “I was afraid that I would be interrupted by travelers.” To which Elijah said, “you should have prayed an abbreviated Service.” Elijah paused and asked what Rabbi Yosi heard in the ruins, to which he responded, “I heard a Heavenly voice, a Bat Kol.” From this story we learn two lessons: one that praying anywhere is perfect as long as you have kavannah, intention, for your prayers. And second, that God’s heavenly voice, the Bat Kol, can be found in the most beautiful of buildings or the most destitute of places; in the rush of people on the road around you, or in a gymnasium. The bottom line is that it is about the person who is doing the praying, praising, appreciating and petitioning, NOT the particular place or ambience of the setting. If makom, which means “place” is a Name of God, it means the particular place where God is being encountered, can be wherever any of us is.

“Surely there is God in this place and I did not know” said our Ancestor Jacob in Bereshit 28. Jacob awoke from his vivid, spectacular dream of angels simultaneously descending and ascending a sulam - potentially a staircase or ladder - and remarked “Mah nora ha’makom ha’zeh,” …”What awesomeness is in this place! Jacob makes an altar and names the place Beth El, a house of God. In 2015, I toured the old city of David with my grandparents. Our guide, a renowned architect, took us to a random place under the old city and had me read a few verses. They were those verses of surprise at a spontaneous discovery of Divinity. Then our guide said, “this is Beth El. Here is the stone for Jacob’s pillow, here is the altar, and here is the olive oil press used to anoint this place as holy.” Who knows?! It looked just as the Torah described, and in that moment I felt God. Even if I could, I would not ask Ancient Jacob if he believed in God. After all it would seem to be the wrong question. For in fact he does not remark that he believes but rather identifies that God was in the place and subsequently acted embarrassed that he did not know. Both Radak and Rashi comment that had Jacob known how holy this place was he would not have slept there. But why? Why not lean into and fall deeper down into the presence and glory of God when we can? We posit that Jacob believed in God.
because he felt the presence and Divine message in a dream, but Jacob does not explain what it means to believe in God, rather he exclaims: “God was here” For Jacob it was messaging, situational meditation and dream intervention.

We learn from Jacob that God is not just in words and prayers but often in places and situations. Sometimes it is the feeling that you have in the space of flexibility to just be surrounded by the presence of God. Kaddish Yatom is a recognition of God’s glory and blessing. If we were to write a blessing now, that is said multiple times a day for up to a year, with all we know about loss and grief, would this be the language and the formula for that recitation? I’m not sure, but I know from many that it is not the words of the kaddish that bring comfort but rather the way in which kaddish is said. There is a beautiful teaching that is illustrated in the Koren Siddur that shows the kaddish as a dialogue. Written out on one line “yitgadal v’yitkadash shemeh rabah” and on the next line, as if in a script, “amen.” In order for the mourner to recite this prayer, there must be at least 9 other Jewish adults in the room and someone to say “amen,” someone to speak out “I am here,” “we are here.” In that regard, the kaddish is beautiful and provides community for the mourner. However, during times of grief, devastation or unspeakable hatred it is hard to want to praise God, at least for me.

The morning of the shooting in Pittsburgh, there was a Bar Mitzvah at my shul in Northern California, and I prayed with a provoked intensity and poignancy, but not as much a petition of God, but rather my desire for humans to change and the world to become more peaceful. Someone may say, “Yes, but Rabbi Schatz, that means you believe in God and acknowledge that God can help us in those ways.” Maybe so. But in that moment, that morning, after such tragic news, that was not the belief I was choosing to focus on. Rather the effect of kaddish yatom that morning. Thinking of those who were reciting the words for 11 lives lost and in between the words of glory of God, the response “amen” from community members near and far sharing in hugs and support for the Tree of Life Synagogue family.
Shomeah Tefillah - a God who listens to the prayers that I need to say and hear. In 2016, I accompanied my aunt, Rietta, to Michigan to pick up a little baby, 3 weeks premature, who she was going to adopt. Two years earlier my uncle had died, leaving behind my aunt and their 2 and a half year old, Joseph. Rietta wanted a brother for Joseph and entered the adoption process with success. Grieving my uncle will always challenge my relationship with God, what does it mean to believe in God and what can my true belief in the Divine do for me in such times of deep sorrow and anger? When we arrived in Michigan, we went straight to the hospital to hold this tiny baby and introduce him to our family. I was overwhelmed with the kedusha, the “holiness” of being a sh’lica, a messenger for the love my uncle would have given this baby as a second parent. I felt connected to both my uncle and to God. And I felt, much like Rabbi Yosi, as though I was walking amongst and into my own ruins of pain and sadness to enter a place of ultimate happiness and love. Early the next morning, Rietta and I ran out to buy everything a baby would need before meeting the birth mom at the hospital to sign some papers that afternoon. The birth mom was late. 2 hours late, and I found myself praying harder, and caring more than I ever had for a connection to God. We were afraid she was late because she wanted to take him back and we would leave Michigan without this baby we had already come to love so much. The birth mom showed up and we just started to cry. She hugged my aunt, held the baby, and watching her say goodbye was a moment with God. The choice to give this baby a different life, knowing what she could not give to him and yet feeling so in love with him as her own flesh and blood. God was in that place and I knew it. She thanked us, we thanked her, we hugged her and when she left, we picked up this little baby, a son and a cousin and called him Daniel for the first time, a name that both my aunt Rietta and my uncle Lee had wanted for their second child.

Do you believe in God? Do you believe in God? Let’s change that question: Do you feel God? Do you sense a Divine spark in yourself, and do you recognize the Divine spark in others you interact with? Do you have moments of wow, how could that have ever happened without a Holy Being, whether devastating or miraculous? In a New York Times article written after the mass shooting in El Passo, George Yancy, a philosophy professor at Emory University, quotes
Ralph Waldo Emerson saying, “Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticisms. The forgoing generations beheld God face to face; we through their eyes. Why should we not also have an original relation to the universe?”

Yancy continues, “Emerson emboldens a legitimate question, though one with a theological inflection: Why can’t I have an original relation to You, God? [...]” Though Yancy’s letter was written in the face of suffering and distraught political feelings, I think it is a beautiful way to ask about belief in God. We can bring God into our human interactions, decisions, successes and failings. Using God like a “fair-weather friend” on an ad hoc basis might lead to terrible frustration, much like defunding social services and complaining about why more isn’t being done to help our most vulnerable.

I feel God. I engage with God. I seek moments of attachment to a Holy Being. I question the violence and destructiveness in our world through my relationship with the Holy Blessing One. I’m still not sure what it means to believe in God, but I know that if we are made in God’s image, we are meant to be capable of being similar to God in important ways. I believe in You and me and the Created world, and our responsibility for its maintenance through godliness and holiness.

Shana Tova