

**God in the Clouds – sermon for High holydays
Rabbi Stephen Wise – 2012/5773**

When I was 15 years old, my best friend Jeremy invited me to go skiing with his family at Whistler in British Columbia. For those who have only skied in Ontario, where Mt St. Louis is the highest peak, there is nothing quite like the majestic mountains of the Rockies. We flew into Vancouver, drove up to the base of Whistler and checked into our hotel. The next morning, we went up the hill, my first time on a gondola, and I knew we were definitely not in Ontario. The gondola was a high speed lift that was able to accommodate large groups of people, with the skis loaded on a rack on the outside, and everyone toasty warm on the inside. We disembarked from the gondola and that's when I realized that we were only halfway up the mountain. It was the most glorious snow I had ever seen and

the choice of runs was endless. I could have skied for a week, and still not skied all the runs out there.

Jeremy and I decided we wanted to get to the very top so we took a high speed chairlift. As we entered the chairlift I found that the only thing missing was the sun. It was a cloudy and overcast day without even a hint of sunshine peeking through. As the chairlift started up the mountain the clouds seemed to be hanging so low that I felt I could actually reach out and touch them.

Have you ever touched a cloud? It seems impossible, doesn't it, to reach up to the sky and touch a cloud. Well, the chair went higher and higher and we actually entered into the clouds. You can't see much, they're actually fog. You can't touch it, but you know you're in it. Its dark and mysterious... a truly unique experience.

As we continued to travel up, I saw the sun peeking through and suddenly we had made it through and above the clouds. I quickly glanced behind me to see the clouds below me, and there I was, like a bird or a plane, far above the clouds. As we reached the top on this gorgeous sunny day, there was nothing but bright blue sky as far as the eye could see. As I gazed down the mountain, I saw a row of fluffy clouds, and off in the distance, other mountain peaks were poking their way through the layers of cloud. If heaven could be visualized, this was it. I became aware of why someone thoughtfully called this chairlift ... 7th heaven.

We spent most of that first day skiing there. Each run began in sunshine, then into the clouds. Then we emerged into a clearing below the clouds where it was darker and overcast. Then we rode the

chair back up through the clouds to the beautiful sunshine. What a day! Skiing the clouds of Whistler. I'll never forget it.

I was reminded of this vision of entering the clouds when we read the torah portion describing God in the book of Exodus. We know we cannot use our 5 senses to engage with God – smell, touch, sight, taste or hearing. But in ancient times, and especially right after the moment of Exodus, the people Israel needed tangible expressions of God. In the Bible god is often treated in an anthropomorphic way to enable us to relate to God more easily. When God released us from slavery in Egypt, we were able to witness God's miracles through the 10 plagues and the parting of the sea. When God was angry, the torah uses the expression, "*vayikchar af adonai*", "god's nose was red" because we know

that's what a human looks like when he or she is angry. When god rescued us, it was with "*yad chazaka v'zroah netuya*" "a strong hand and an outstretched arm", again an image we are familiar with. When God led us from the edge of the sea towards mount Sinai, we were led by a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of smoke by day. These were aspects of the natural world that God manipulated to manifest his greatness and are easy for us to relate to.

But when God was not easily available, such as when Moses went up to mount Sinai for 40 days and nights to receive the 10 commandments, the bible tells us that the Israelites missed God's nearness, and many turned to the building of a golden calf to have something close that they could relate to. God thundered his displeasure, Moses smashed the

tablets across the golden calf and the unbelievers were severely punished. It seems to me that the punishment taught us all a lesson about serving false idols.

But again, realizing we needed something tangible to relate to, God commanded the building of the *mishkan*, the ark of the covenant, to house the tablets and the *mizbeach*, the holy altar, on which to worship burnt offerings to God. The smoke rising off the altar was intended to appease god. And when the tabernacle was completed, the torah tells us that God's cloud hovered over the tent of meeting. This is the bible's way of expressing that God was happy and content with his people, that god would accompany us as we wandered for the next 40 years towards the promised land.

The concept of a cloud is a recurrent theme in Jewish tradition. When Solomon finally finished building the first temple in Jerusalem, God descended "in a cloud" as the people watched. They understood that this was God's dwelling place when the priests began their worship ceremonies by offering a sacrifice. The idea of God descending in a cloud continued to serve as a manifestation of God's nearness during some very special moments in annual holiday cycle. On Yom Kippur, the high priest of the Temple is the only person allowed to enter the inner sanctum, the holy of holies. There he prostrates himself before God, placing the sins of the entire people of Israel on his shoulders. At this very moment, the cloud of God descends and surrounds the holy of holies, while the high priest asks for forgiveness for his people. God delivers the sign by

turning the crimson thread the priest holds in his hands into pure white. The cloud then ascends and all sins are forgiven. Yom Kippur ends, the Shofar sounds and the fasting concludes.

In literature the alluring concept of cloud has always garnered a great deal of attention, especially among those who write about the natural world.

Jack London in his book "The Sea Wolf" describes the fog his ship sailed through on the bay of San Francisco on one grey January afternoon at the turn of the 20th century.

"I fell to dwelling upon the romance of the fog. And romantic it certainly was—the fog, like the grey shadow of infinite mystery, brooding over the whirling speck of earth; and men, mere motes of light and sparkle, cursed with an insane relish for work, riding their steeds of wood and steel through

the heart of the mystery, groping and floundering their way blindly through the Unseen, and clamouring and clanging in confident speech the while their hearts are heavy with incertitude and fear. This beautiful image of the cloud gives us both a romantic view of clouds juxtaposed with its inherent dangers and trepidation.

Today there is a more modern technological version of the cloud. I am sure that all of you know by now that cloud computing has become the latest development in the age of the internet. We are all now part of the digital cloud. My family owns ipods, iphones and ipads. One morning, not too long ago, just after I set up all the devices, I noticed on my iphone that I now had new apps such as "meet Justin Beiber", "pyramid run" and "face goo". It turns out that when my children download apps on

their devices, they automatically go to the cloud. Since we share an account, the cloud then sends things back to my phone and vice versa.

It's an ideal way to share pictures, videos and data among users, and it's actually quite amazing. I don't ever remember setting it up but sure enough things are shared and then stored in the Cloud.

What is this cloud? And where is it? I guess it actually exists somewhere in some mainframe computers, but I'm sure that I'm not alone in wondering where it is. To me it feels like all my data is stored in this cloud out there in space, where I can send things and retrieve things. These products with "I" in front of them are part of our desire or need to personalize our own music and entertainment. It's my I-pod. I decide what music is on there. I purchase individual songs I like, and

create my own favorite playlist. Books, university courses, old movies, much of them free, are all accessible on this tiny device in my hand. Its very much an "I" world.

At the same time, with the cloud – we have moved to a "we" world, where we share things. It's scary to think that my data and preferences and music selections are out there where anyone can get access to them, but it's also comforting to know that my precious memories are being kept somewhere safe. I know that things are backed up, so I never lose anything. I don't know where it is, I can't touch this cloud of information, but it's always there. It's a cloud that is both embracing, powerful and connecting.

So we see that the image of the cloud has long served as a powerful symbol, You can see where I

am going with this. As far as this rabbi is concerned, the cloud is a beautiful metaphor for god. In essence isn't that what God really is.... a force that is out there, but is hard to get close to. We don't know exactly where it is, but its always there.

The cloud is a part of the natural world. Unlike fire, it is touchable and accessible. Unlike water it does not provide sustenance. Unlike an arm or fist, it is without direct strength. The cloud is there. You can see it but you cannot actually touch it. Yet if you are immersed in it, you know it's around you, you can feel its presence. It exists and yet it is very hard to describe. You cannot use your senses fully to embrace it. But it's so easy to enter. Like a hug, it envelops you, surrounds you and radiates from you. And it's always there, ready to access, whether you need it or not. Like me on the chairlift, you go in

and out of clouds, into sun, into dark and back to sun. We move in a constant cycle of distance and nearness with the divine.

On these high holy days, this image can be helpful in accessing the divine. Right now your prayers are entering the cloud, God has descended upon our lives. We don't have to ride a chairlift up to seventh heaven at Whistler to find God- *Lo bashamayim hi* – God is not so far away that we have to chase her. God is always all around us. Like clouds in the sky, they are always there, whether they affect us or not. Like an i-pod, God is as close as a hand held device. God stores our memories, our hopes, our fears and our dreams. Its all stored there, take the time to access your cloud today, and make the changes as you need and want. Make your updates, not on your apps, but on your soul.

And may you be written for goodness in the book of life. Shana Tova!