

Neil Tow

RH1 Sermon 5771/2010: The Challenges of תפילה

1. My teacher Rabbi Marcia Prager tells the story of years ago when she went camping with friends. They went together to the supply store before heading out on the trip. They had freeze-dried foods there--Reb Marcia referred to these foods as luxuries, something she couldn't afford to spend on when she was in college. All the same, she decided to buy one thing. She purchased a freeze-dried brownie for the trip. At the camp site she peeled open the package and took a look at this treat. It was thin as a sliver. Well, why not... She pulled off a piece and tasted it. Blah! She said, "It tasted just enough like chocolate that she felt cheated..." And then Reb Marcia (slowly) *read the directions*--put in hot water first, then it will ballon up 1,000 times the size like a sponge--into a real brownie.
2. Now you're probably not surprised that I'm sharing this story on Rosh Hashanah rather than on Yom Kippur!
3. It's not only about the fact that we're enjoying sweet foods on the New Year. Reb Marcia shared this story as a way of exploring how our Siddur, Machzor, how our praying may sometimes feel like the dried out brownie. We're soul-searching for the flavors of inspiration and yet we gnaw on what may feel like a dried out source, or maybe we feel a little dried out in spirit, wondering how we might be able to taste the sweetness of feeling richly and closely connected to ourselves, to others, and to God, and especially today when the community, as a whole, is united in standing before God.
4. But Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are not easy when it comes to the life of prayer, the life of tefillah. They are the longest and most complex services of the Jewish year. We raise

our voices in holy words of prayers-poetry-traditional Jewish texts for study, blow the shofar, read from the Torah. The prayers that we say are worded differently than the rest of the year and they are found in a special prayer book, the Machzor. They include Medieval poetry composed in a centuries old style filled with many obscure literary references. And the music of the High Holiday services is different from the Shabbat and Festival prayers we're used to singing and hearing the rest of the year.

5. The challenge of praying to God is still greater as we find ourselves under a measure of pressure to make an appeal on behalf of ourselves toward the incoming New Year. Recognizing and confessing our flaws, mistakes and missteps and seeking forgiveness from others and from God is a potentially overwhelming thing to do.
6. At the same time God is especially tuned in to the voices of our souls, **דַּרְשׁוּ יְהוָה בְּהִמְצְאוֹ** "דַּרְשׁוּ יְהוָה בְּהִמְצְאוֹ" "Seek God while God may be found, call upon God while God is near." (Isaiah 55:6) Maimonides, the great Jewish thinker and writer, brings forward the teaching that eventhough teshuvah/repentance and tzeakah/calling out to God are meaningful for us as individuals at anytime, during the days between RH and YK they are even more meaningful and productive for us and God is leaning in to listen as the Prophet writes, "God is near." We feel that the clock is ticking. This can be a challenging spiritual time.
7. So picture a mountain. See it in every detail. The realities we face at the beginning of the Yamim Noraim/the High Holiday season could make us feel that we are standing at the foot of this mountain ready to climb but without rope, without supplies--just our own will, our

bodies and our spirit.

8. What I'd like to do today is begin a creative and exciting process of discovery of prayer that will turn the mountain into a gentle rolling hill, with the sun and horizon hiding just beyond, pulling us forward in yearning and striving toward things we can't fully explain or imagine. What a possibility! What a potential gift to ourselves for this new year! To become more actively engaged, more in tune with the thinking and actions of a fully connected life of prayer and dialogue with God. *We're going to confront why prayer is difficult and what we can do to help us today and through the rest of the year to have a prayer experience that moves us, that causes us to think, to feel, to cry, to smile and to wonder. Let's begin to reanimate our prayers, and make them jump off the page with all the power of these holy words passed from our ancestors to us!* Instead of feeling distant from the service, from the prayer book, from how to express our Jewish identity, with a feeling that we're gnawing at a dried out piece of food, we can taste the richness of flavor that can come from an expanding and abundant life of prayer/tefillah.
9. We find a starting point in the words of Wilfred A. Peterson, Prayer is climbing to the spiritual mountain-top of conscious oneness with God that we may light again the candles of our spirits and become new men and women.(DPE 1992, 134)
10. This is the renewal that we seek today. This is the renewal that will give us the courage to step together into a New Year, with all its unknowns, with all our doubts, fears, and with all our hopes as well.
11. And renewing ourselves in the words and matters of tefillah, of prayer, begins by thinking about the main difficulties we face when pray.

12. We first need to think more creatively and widely about what prayer *is and can be* for us.(pause) In the words of Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, too often we approach prayer as a vending-machine experience--we put in our prayer and we either receive or do not receive what we prayed for. If we receive what we pray for, then prayer is “working”. If we don’t, then the vending machine is broken and there’s little else we can do. (Quote in Comins 2010, 25)
13. The root of the English word “prayer” is about petition, asking, requesting. That is only one kind of communication with God. The Hebrew word “tefillah” suggests another focus, a turn inward, an evaluation of the self in the face of God and the universe. Rabbi Johanan in a midrash (MRabbah Vaetchanan, 20, quoted in Comins article by Rabbi Anne Brenner) uses many words to describe the act of prayer: cry, lament, groan, sing, encounter, trouble, call, fall, request...
14. All these terms and words and more stretch our imaginations, help us to begin to see that prayer is a gradual and delicate unfolding of ourselves before God as we seek God’s presence in our lives, as we seek meaning, as we reach out to what is beyond to help bring it closer in.
15. Rabbi Jonathan Slater describes prayer in terms of the Shofar that we hear today: *The one who prays is like the shofar. The shofar itself has no independent significance or power. It is only meaningful when someone blows into it. The sound that emerges is recognized and has a meaning. We are the shofar--and it is God who moves through us...to generate the prayer that emerges....*
16. Our inner prayers are there even before we see the words printed on the page. They are

the often unconscious blueprint that aligns us with what is beyond ourselves. Prayer begins in the heart, and is known by the Rabbis as *avodah she'balev*. The Torah teaches us ואהבת ה' את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך You shall love Ado--nai your God with all your heart.

17. The second area for us to think about today is the setting, and the tools of prayer--I hope that many of us, have had the experience of feeling our hearts fill up by sunsets, natural wonders, birth of children, and stories of the miraculous. In those moments existence itself is a prayer as we experience the world in a unique lens of what we normally think is possible. We don't usually find these kinds of natural wonders within the walls of a synagogue. The synagogue is a place where there is a structure and a text to prayer. Here is a place where we can think, discuss, question, and process the feelings of the heart, but it is not a mountain top view of a sparkling river valley at sunset (we could paint that scene right over here on the open wall or picture ourselves there.) A challenge for us is taking this space and using the Siddur and Machzor and the other tools we have at hand to create spiritual experiences.

18. We also confront the Hebrew language as a potential barrier to prayer, a language that for many of us is neither our first nor second language. And I would argue that the English translations in the prayer books can be difficult for us. They often do not sound like the same language we speak. Hebrew is also a difficult language to translate into English. It is an evocative language, classic example of this are the words אדון עולם from our well-known closing prayer for Shabbat morning. Adon Olam all at once means "Ruler of the Universe", "The Eternal One", "The Master of Myster", and "Master of Strength". The Hebrew

language is a treasure trove of meaning that we can access by studying even the opening words of our prayers.

19. The prayer book is still the primary vessel that carries our heartfelt ancient words into the present day. When I visited the house where I grew up over the summer, I picked up and prayed with the siddur that I received at my Aleph class consecration service in 1986. It was moving for me to think about how the book and the words in it are the same as they were 24 years ago, but I am different. The same is true for the words of the Machzor and Siddur. The Rabbis who created our prayers in the generations after the destruction of the 2nd Temple composed their reflections on God, Torah, and life in the language and imagery of their time, and each subsequent generation in communities all over the world has stood on their shoulders, expressing their thoughts to God through the prism of their own times and own experiences.
20. And for us, it's so important to do the same--to bring our whole selves to our prayers, to search the words of our prayers for reflections of our own experiences.
21. A service has a structure, from morning blessings to verses of song, from the unity message of the Shema to the Amidah dialogue. We live in a society that questions and is skeptical about structures, but Judaism has always maintained that some structure is necessary even within the life of the spirit. While Jewish communities have generally fostered a life of minyan, community prayer, the great Hasidic masters, teachers of the kabbalah, and others cultivated individual reflection, meditation, chant, dance, and more. But could we function as a community if there were no structure? Could we be as one if there were no organizing prayers and rituals? Reb Mimi Feigelson teaches us, "There are so many times that words

fall short, and I don't even know how to articulate what I so deeply yearn to express..."

Achieving a sense of comfort in Jewish prayer requires us to become more familiar and attuned to the individual prayers, how they merge into sections of a service, how one section bridges to the next and what the whole flow looks like from morning blessings through Adon Olam.

22. The third major area we need to think about is how to pray. We often confuse the act of reading with prayer. The books we hold in our hands are not meant to be read from cover to cover for information. Each word is a place where we take our leap of faith. Even the letters themselves carry meaning and mystery that can open spiritual pathways that we may not have seen at first. The closest non-religious reading experience that resembles prayer is interpreting poems--evocative combinations of words that show rather than tell, that cause us to see our world, reality itself, with a hue and glow that is far more subtle than the routine way our eyes perceive the world.

23. Here's an example of a poem about prayer, in this case the poet uses the word "worship".

Allow me to share it with you and see where it takes us: *To worship is to stand in awe under a heaven of stars, before a flower, a leaf in the sunlight, or a grain of sand./To worship is to work with dedication and skill; it is to pause from work and listen to a strain of music./Worship is loneliness seeking communion./It is a thirsty land crying out for rain./Worship is kindred fire in our hearts; it moves through deeds of kindness and acts of love./Worship is the mystery within us,*

*reaching out to the mystery beyond./It is an inarticulate silence yearning to speak; It is the window of the moment open to the sky of the eternal.(Reverend Jacop Trapp, Infinity in Your hand)--quoted in Dov Peretz Elkins "Moments"*

1992

24. When we approach this poem and others, we sense that the words are less description and more an opening that shows the way toward a new sensitivity to the world.
25. Sefer Abudarham, the classic Jewish text on prayer, teaches us that prayers show us the way to connect, to form a relationship between ourselves and God, as it says in the Talmud--*A person must connect all his thoughts and actions toward heaven with the blessings and prayers, as it says in the Book of Proverbs: בכל דרכיך דעהו, והוא יישר אורחותיך (3:6), In all your ways acknowledge God, and God will lay out a smooth path before you.*"
26. And in Jewish community the minyan is central to our experience. Today were are blessed with hundreds who have joined for prayer. We've fulfilled the requirement for a minyan and then some...But what is the meaning and power of gathering as a group, of requiring a group for prayer?
27. Rabbi Shalomi teaches that if one stage of spiritual thinking is "My soul, separate from everything else, is connected with God." The next step is in the spirit of minyan--as he explains, "Nobody is separate from anything else because my body, from its mitochondria on, is a community. And I'm a member of a community. That's why communal prayer is so important. In the community we create a God-field that is much stronger than the God-field I can create as an individual."

28. Can we feel that God-field today?
29. Can we have the courage to open ourselves up to the prayers on the page, the prayers in our hearts, the longing, the yearning, the pain, the tears and the joy?
30. Can we begin to find our way through the great classic of Jewish literature that is the Machzor and the Siddur? As Rabbi Brad Artson asks, can we have the energy to study and probe deeper into the words and images of the Siddur just as we did when we struggled to decipher the words of the great classics of Shakespeare in English class?
31. It is through our courage, through our study, with all our gathered strength that we will be able to transform this New Year and transform ourselves.
32. How can we do the learning that will help us grow? We can study a prayer in the Siddur outside the context of services. We can study in the classroom--this year I'll be teaching both an adult bar/bat mitzvah class and other sessions on our prayers. And we can also get more practice by participating in the various Shabbat and holiday services throughout the year--praying does take practice.
33. Isaac Bashevis Singer, the great writer and Nobel Prize winner in literature, tells us of a transformation through prayer that happened in his home at 10 Krochmalna St. in Warsaw, where his father was Rabbi and where there was a minyan on the High Holidays. He tells of Reb Asher the dairyman who served as the Hazzan, allow me to share some of his words, "True, they all knew him well. Only yesterday they had bought from him or from his wife a saucepan of milk, a pot of clabber (unpasteurized milk allowed to turn sour), a few ounces of butter, and had bargained with him for a little extra. But now Asher was the delegate who offered up the prayers of the People of Israel directly to the Almighty, before the

Throne of Glory, amid fluttering angels and books that read themselves, in which are recorded the good deeds and the sins of every mortal soul..."(In my Father's Court, p 166)

34. Today *we all have it within us* to raise up our prayers to the Eternal One who both sits above us in judgment and right next to us in compassion and mercy. Our lives may be different from that of Reb Asher's world, but we are still the same inside, with the same potential to raise up the unspoken prayers in our souls. *The more we can develop our prayer vocabulary, practice, and sense of connection, the better we will be able to feel the ring and beautiful overtones of all of life's moments, from the most challenging to the most sublime.* Each word of prayer that we utter, whether out loud or silent, has the potential of transforming us like it did to Reb Asher, from the person we were to the person we hope to be, from the level of prayer we can achieve now to the uncharted heights.
35. Shana Tovah u'metukah, A sweet New Year, and May the words of our mouths, and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You, Adonai, Our God of Compassion. Amen.