

One of the most formative moments of my life happened over peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. It was my junior year of college, and I was one of the co-presidents of my university's hillel. That month, the various religious organizations on campus were all taking turns making lunches to be delivered to and served at a local homeless shelter. Hillel had committed to make 200 - you guessed it - peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, to be sent over at noon on Wednesday.

The problem, I discovered when stopping by Hillel at 11:00 on Wednesday on my way to class, was that we had forgotten which day was ours. So here we were, 200 sandwiches in the red, with only an hour to go.

There were a few other students around and we collectively decided that we would miss our 11 AM classes that day and spend the next hour frantically making sandwiches. And we were successful. At 12:00 exactly, 200 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were delivered to our local shelter.

While this was an unqualified win for the shelter, it sent me into somewhat of a personal spiral. If I had spent that hour in class - I reasoned with myself - nothing would have been substantively different in the world. Everyone's lives would have remained essentially untouched. Spending 11:00-12:00 making sandwiches, though, meant that 200 more people got lunch that day. 200 lives were markedly different (albeit temporarily; I have no illusions of grandeur about the lasting impact of my sandwich-making).

Suddenly, though, the question of how my time was spent became a burning one. People were hurting. My neighbors were hungry. How could I now justify spending my time or my resources doing anything *other* than churning out sandwich after sandwich?

Luckily, I had wise mentors - including a beloved rabbi - who talked me down from my newfangled plan to quit school and spend my time, and tuition money, on peanut butter. But this question remained, and remains for me to this day, a nagging one. At moments both anticipated and unpredicted, I find my mind wandering to this dilemma: is this activity more or less worthwhile than making sandwiches?

As we approached the High Holy Days this year, I have found myself preoccupied with a close sibling of the sandwich dilemma, which goes something like this:

The world outside of these walls is on fire. Literally, all too often these days. But figuratively - spiritually - too. My neighbors are hungry. Literally - and figuratively, spiritually, too. The norms we know and the structures and institutions we rely on seem to be crumbling; the ideals of respect, of opportunity, of belief in good and in possibility that were once the core of our national heart have been trampled. People out there - on our streets, on our border, in our hospitals, in our schools - they need help. Our own lives, too, may feel as they are aflame - consumed by competing demands, by challenging circumstances, by demanding relationships.

So in the face of all of that that we are holding, all that we are juggling in every moment - how do we excuse taking five days to sit in this building - in its air conditioned rooms, on its plush seats? In the face of a world on fire, how can we morally justify taking this much time to pray?

Our tradition grapples with this question too - and in fact, places this debate at the foundational moment of our formation as a people.

We know the scene: we're at the shores of the Red Sea. We have been liberated from the tyranny of slavery, and are on the brink of a full exodus from the land of our oppressors. The Egyptians are making a quick approach, and the Israelites וַיִּירָאוּ מְאֹד - they become fearful. Moses, on their behalf, cries out to God - and is met with a harsh reply: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה: אֶל-מֹשֶׁה - God said to Moses:

מַה-תִּצְעַק אֵלַי דְּבַר אֶל-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּסְעוּ:

*“Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward.” Get moving!*

*And lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians (as we know this biblical God was wont to do) so that they go in after them.*

This is, in the words of our later tradition, a paradigmatic **תָּמַחְלָה לַעֲשׂוֹת** - the time to act, the time to move, not the time to wait around or turn inward or busy ourselves with an appeal to God.

And yet - this is also the moment, the midrash teaches, when Nachshon stepped into the not-yet-split sea with the words “mi khamokha ba’elim Adonai” - who is like you, God - words of prayer in their own moment that have endured, and are now central to our own tefillah experience.

And so, then and now, we ask: which kind of moment is this - is it an **תָּמַחְלָה לַעֲשׂוֹת**, a time to act, or is it a time to pray? When - in the face of advancing enemies, in the face of impenetrable walls of water, in the face of fear and panic - when do we need to *do*, and when do we need to pray? And why?

Judaism has many answers about the purpose of prayer in the midst of a world on fire. Prayer is self-care, helping nourish us for work that is a marathon, not a sprint. Prayer helps reconnect us with our values, reminding us of the import of lifting the fallen, healing the sick, freeing the captive, bringing about redemption. Prayer *is in and of itself* the work of bettering our communities - at its best, “prayer is action,” Heschel teaches, “meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods.”

Explanations that are all authentic to our tradition, and that all do - in their own ways - ring true. Ring true and - for me, this year, at this moment, also fall short.

So let me tell you, instead, why I'm here. (Besides the fact that this is my job and you pay me to be here.) For me - in both my experience and my observation - it feels like the state of the world (and, sometimes, of our own lives) has the potential to make us feel afraid and alone. And for most of us, when we encounter those emotions, we harden. We want to be strong - we *need* to be, in order to wade through the everyday slog. And yet strong also means hard. Means closed off. Means walls up.

Everything we are about to spend the next ten days doing will work to provide a counter to those natural (and, in their moment, crucial and necessary) states of existence. A space of prayer - when done right - gives us the gift of opening up. Of *being* in a different way. Of allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, to be messy and flawed and emotional. Of giving ourselves time to cry, if we need; to plead, if we need; to hope, if we can, but also to despair, if we need. A space of prayer - the physical space of this room, the emotional space of this machzor, the spiritual space of being in community - that kind of space says: it's okay to be you. Be *all* of you. It's okay to let it all out.

Earlier this year, my dad had to have surgery. Thank God, he's totally fine. But in the weeks leading up to the surgery, the narrative in our family was: be strong. Be strong for dad. And being strong, in these moments, meant - be optimistic. Be hopeful. Don't cry. No fear. No hesitation.

And for the most part, we did a pretty good job, surrounding him with confidence and positivity. The night before the surgery, though, I asked him if I could give him a *mi shebeirakh*, praying for a successful operation. "Sure," he agreed. "But just so you know, I don't think that a prayer will change the outcome of the surgery." (The lawyer got his caveat in.) I didn't think so either. But I prayed anyway. I prayed, and - in the space of that prayer - I also cried. We cried. Our tears, released by these ancient words, expressed fear, and worry. And- they also expressed a love deeper than any words of our own could have articulated. Within the space of a few short Hebrew lines - not all of which we all understood, not any of which we all fully believed - we suddenly had a space capable of holding the totality of our emotions in that moment. A moment that, suddenly, was not about being strong. It was about being us.

That is what prayer can do. That is why I'm here. That is what I hope, over these next ten days, we can create together - a space of prayer that is not about what we do, but is about who we allow ourselves to be.

Because without such an outlet, our lives have the danger of turning into תַּיִתּוּלָּהּ after תַּיִתּוּלָּהּ תַּיִתּוּלָּהּ - endless series of worthy, holy action but without any space for emotion or release - the very things that make us human, that make the outcome of this action worth it. Without such an outlet, the world has the chance to harden us so severely - to scare us so successfully - that our fighting turns us into versions of ourselves that we no longer recognize - strong and “victorious,” maybe, but closed off, insensitive, aggressive, quick to judge. Without such an outlet, we face the danger of making it to the other side of the sea - of emerging on the dry land of whatever comes next - only to realize that our own hearts have become hardened in the process - only to realize that, in the end, we have become no different than the Egyptians from whom we fled.

This danger - the danger of allowing ourselves to become so overrun by fear, or by loneliness, or by anger - the danger is that if, in such state, we are let loose into a world on fire, we will be all too tempted to respond in kind. But if we only fight fire with fire, the whole world will just keep on burning.

And so we need a different way. A different way to be, a different way to feel, a different way to fight. And so we need a space of prayer - to soften us, to open us up, to let us feel and connect and release and love.

In the Talmud, in Masechet Brachot - the volume on prayer - the ancient rabbis ask the question: who is exempt from the obligation to say the sh'ma? In asking this, they're essentially asking - what activity is either so important that it overrides the need for prayer, or, I think more accurately, what experience *is in and of itself so akin to prayer* that it can stand in its place and provide an exemption?

One hypothesis is a guy on a sinking ship. A good guess - we might have predicted that such a person, in such a state of emergency, is exempt from saying the sh'ma. Not so, the rabbis rule. What about a person in mourning, they ask? A mourner, we know, is exempt from other mitzvot, like the requirement to wear tefillin. Shouldn't they too be exempt from the sh'ma? Nope again.

Who, then, does fall under into this category? The Talmud's answer: a couple on their wedding night - the Sages' *only example* of people who do not need this moment of prayer. Why? Because their hearts are already as open as they get. Because their love is already flowing as freely as it ever will. Because they are already in touch with the truest versions of themselves, saved only for their most trusted beloved. Only in this state - this ultimate posture of walls down, defenses stripped, most authentic selves kind of love - only then is prayer no longer needed. Because then, in that moment, its goals - our goals - have already been achieved. That is what we're moving toward.



When we emerge from this cocoon in 10 days, the chances are high that the world will look not unlike how it looks today. Neighbors will still be hungry, fires will still be raging, people will still be at war with each other and themselves.

But we - we can emerge different. We can - if we take these days seriously, if we use this time thoughtfully - we can reenter a world on fire, and we can counter it not with fire of our own, but with honest emotion, with expansive compassion, with authentic and deep and abiding love. It might not put out all the flames. But it can plant and water the seeds for a type of world, for a type of being, that is worth fighting for in the first place.