

## Rabbi Andrea Merow – Rosh Hashana – 5781 – *Refuah Mesahpeket*

Today, our story starts at the famous County Club Diner, when it was still family owned and you could see anyone and everyone there, day or night. There, I learned important lessons about prayer. Yes, not cheesecake, but prayer. Not at the Seminary or shul, but at a diner. (Kind of apropos for someone from Philly where the oft-asked question used to be: *Does “everyone who knows go to the Melrose”?*)

I know the date and the time. It’s odd to remember a single conversation from so long ago. The date was September 11<sup>th</sup>, 3:15 pm. You know the year. There were 3 others: A Talmud professor, and Lutheran and Methodist Pastors. 4 shuls, 5 Churches and a Mosque, it almost sounds like the set up for a joke, but there was nothing funny. In the afternoon at the diner, we sat with open prayer books, tears and fears. We constructed a service of grief and hope for an interfaith community. We chose readings, Psalms, and songs. Then one Pastor asked, “but when do we pray?” He didn’t mean the words written by King David in a Psalm, or in our prayer books. He meant, when do we open our hearts and pour out our deepest emotions to The Holy One? That night we came together in fellowship, prayer, community.

We created quiet space for people to speak from their heart. *Because* we were in a time of great turmoil, people were more willing to be contemplative and open - this was true prayer. For some time after 9/11 that clergy-group met regularly, to pray and to consider ways we could help one another’s community to heal.

**We are in a similar time now.** The world needs enormous healing; its problems are almost too many to enumerate: A deadly global pandemic where upwards of 6M in the US have been infected and 200K lost; worldwide, almost 1M have died; a profound economic crisis as a result of efforts to thwart the virus; deeply polarized political environments; social unrest born of centuries of injustice; an alarming rate of climate change; wealth inequity and gratuitous violence. The list is overwhelming.

If there was ever a time to cry out in prayer my friends, it is now!

Anne Lamont is my favorite NYTimes best-selling author. She writes about spirituality in a down to earth, authentic way. In her book entitled “Help, Thanks, Wow: Three Elements of Prayer”, Lamont reminds us that across all religions we express ourselves to God, and to ourselves, by expressing Wow, Thanks and Dear God, I need Help. Let’s unpack these 3 elements of prayer:

The first is: WOW, or what Dr. Abraham Joshua Heschel calls “radical amazement”. It is when we sing *Mah Gadlu maashecha Yah*– “How lovely, deep and wonderful are Your works God.” This is a prayer of WOW.

The second element of Prayer is “Thankfulness.” We express gratitude for the gifts we receive, like the *Motzi* for food, and blessings where we thank God for the Universe and all it contains.

The “Wow” and the “Thanks” prayers are relatively easy. Asking for help in prayer is hard spiritual work. *We often think asking means getting, and that’s not how prayer works. It is, however, what makes God elusive, and real prayer, difficult.*

Meaningful prayer happens when we allow the overwhelmingly, trying events in our lives to pierce and confront our soul. Prayer is noticing what needs to be fixed in our lives and in the world and asking for help from God. Prayer allows us to feel less overwhelmed by the enormity of the task of healing ourselves and the world. It is our aloneness, vulnerability, and true experience of brokenness and loss, that can actually be necessary, in a way, for prayer. There is vulnerability in all of the "wow, thanks, or help" prayers. Vulnerability is the thing that, as much as we try to avoid it, allows us to open up.

And prayer must lead us to concrete steps to heal the world.

Can we create space for silence, tears, and fears? Can we prime our souls to become vulnerable? Can our prayers lead us to actions of healing?

What may in fact **aid** our ability this year to find the supplications that are deep within us, are all the changes in how we are gathering this year: being at home, and not in a space filled with others. The living conditions during the pandemic have led us to introspection – whether in solitude or with others, we’ve had more time to think deeply. The lemonade from this pandemic lemon of not being together may just be the inspiration for you to take some extra time and thought with a particular prayer.

The words in our prayer book are what we call “fixed prayer”, *keva* - we turn to them often for words when we need them. There is also “spontaneous prayer”, *kavannah* – and that you are more familiar with than you realize. “Oh, God...” please let my loved one not be in pain; please let me pass this test. Or please dear God...let the doctors find a cure for my child.

We Jews tend to not be so comfortable with spontaneous prayer. Also, if one sees prayer as simply giving us what we want, solving our problems, we need to remember that is not how the prayer works. That is magical thinking, not prayer.

For some, asking for help from *anyone* is difficult, but we do, in fact, need others. You know, the famous (air quotes here) “rabbinic” words, “I’ll get by with a little help from my friends.” Along with sharing your troubles with others, asking for help from God, especially at times when it takes work to even discern God’s presence, is very hard, yet also helpful. Judy Blume put it succinctly in her iconic title, “Are You There God, It’s me, Margaret?” Often, we ask the same, Are you there, God? When times are confusing, in the middle of a pandemic, when the problems of our world are enormous, when we are suffering, we wonder, are you there, God? Even the ancient rabbis were not always sure if God was listening, so they wrote the prayer *Sh’ma Koleinu* – Hear our voices God!!

And yet, we do find God's comforting presence in the classic words and the familiar tunes. The words, the tunes, the love in our community – this is where we can find God. We pray for God to give strength to patients and their loved ones, wisdom to their doctors, intelligence to scientists, insight to politicians, strength to leaders, the ability to think before we speak and love.

Will more or deeper prayer change the outcome of a personal diagnosis or of a societal ill? No, it isn't a magical incantation. Prayer will provide us with a framework to express our fears and wants, it will help us to focus on what is most crucial in our lives. It **also** connects us to our Jewish past as we create our Jewish future, especially in these uncertain times. And that is magical. Prayer also bolsters our own ability to **act** for good in the world.

Dr. Heschel also said that when he marched with Rev. Dr. MLK Jr, "he felt that his feet were praying." He meant that our prayer must lead us to actions that bring about healing, justice and love to repair the broken parts of our world.

Often the enormity of some societal ills makes it difficult to see a way out, a way towards healing. Our ancient Rabbis knew that the process of healing our world - *tikkun olam*, was at times overwhelming and thus Rabbi Tarfon says, "*Lo aleicha hamelecha ligmor, v'lo at, or ata, ben or bat horin l'hibatel memenah*. You do not need to finish the sacred work, but neither are you free to avoid starting". (*Pirkei Avot*)

A commentary notes that Rabbi Tarfon is telling us **Not to despair**.

This has led me to an idea that I want to share with you about our expectations of healing of body, spirit and of the world:

When one is ill, we generally pray for them with the blessing, "*refuah shelayma*." Wishing them a full and complete healing. *Refuah shelayma*.

Maybe that is too much to ask for. Instead, could we ask for *enough* healing to make a difference? We want to alter an ill in society or in the life of an individual, but is a complete recovery realistic?

What if, instead, we asked for *refuah misahpeket* – enough healing that would make a meaningful difference? *Refuah* – healing. *Misahpeket* –sufficient or enough.

There is a parable about a Monarch who hires workers to fill in a gigantic hole. The foolish worker takes a look at the hole and despairs, saying, "How can I ever finish this?" The smarter worker says to himself, "I was only hired for a day, at least I have found work." Thus, God says to us, "You are all only hired for one day at a time. Do your day's work and do not spend time that day worrying about what tomorrow's work will bring. Do not despair."

Often when problems are so large, we become paralyzed, and praying is not good enough; prayer must lead us to action.

- How many times after a mass shooting do we see people gathering together and praying? YES, Pray. Then get up and act! Do one thing to create less gun violence.
- How many times can we watch people of color being held to a different standard of law, living with inequity of opportunity? We pray for the well-being of all of our brothers and sisters. But then prayer should lead us to action, to really listen, to understand our own biases, and work to eradicate systemic racism.
- We can pray for the earth to be healed, but we must REDUCE our own carbon footprint. REDUCE, RECYCLE, REUSE.

That brings us to fighting this pandemic. We pray for the health of those infected and those who care for them. But if we want our prayers answered, we must also act in ways that respect science and create safety.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, the pastors reminded us that to truly pray we must first open our hearts and then we can open our mouths in prayer. We begin each *Amida* saying, “God, open my lips, so that I may pray: in Hebrew the word, *s’fatai* means “lips” but it can also mean “boundaries”. We need to break down the boundaries around our hearts that keep us from working towards healing in our relationships and in the broken parts of our world. We need to have our soul become vulnerable, then we need to call out in prayer, then we need just actions that will help to bring about healing.

So, my friends, I hope you will join me in opening your heart as I offer this prayer:

Today, we pray for *refuah maspeket* – meaningful healing, first, to each of you who suffer from mental or physical illness.

Today we pray for good health for all.

Today, we pray that we can learn to listen to the pain of others with deep empathy; and to celebrate the joys of others.

Today, we pray for a more perfect union in our great country, where all are judged on the content of their character and not the color of their skin, their gender, or their country of origin.

Today, we pray that we are able to see the Godly humanity in those who do not share our political opinions.

Today, we pray for justice.

Today, we remember the life of Jewish American icon Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, may her work be for blessing, and may we act in her memory.

Today, we pray for healing for the earth. For clean water and air, for snowcapped mountains to remain frozen, and for rain to fall at its appointed time.

Today, we pray that our prayers will lead us to create enough healing that it will be meaningful to others and to our world.

Today, we pray. Tomorrow we must act. Amen.