

Tu B'av Sermon-- Love Languages

Har Shalom, Summer 2023

Before I went to rabbinical school, I worked as a preschool art teacher at the Edlavitch JCC in downtown DC. I loved the job-- two year olds and three year olds, unlike so many of us jaded old folks, see the world in terms of true love, true anger, or true mystery. For some of them, every time we fingerpainted was pure joy. For some of them, every time a parent dropped them off was pure heartbreak. My colleagues and I loved those kids, and they loved us.

I'd like to share with you a story of something that happened one day at the JCC. It was naptime, the lights were off, the cots were laid out throughout the room, and I was quietly davening mincha by myself as I often did in the sliver of light by the window. I had my siddur out and was quietly chanting through Ashrei, with tefillin wrapped around my arm and hand and

head. From behind me I heard the rustle of fabric. When I turned around I saw that one of the three-year-olds was sitting up on his cot watching me. I went over to him, hunkered down, and asked if he was alright. “Ms. Rachel, what are you doing?” he asked. “I’m praying,” I said. “Oh”, he replied. “What’s praying?” “I’m talking to God”, I replied. “Oh, OK”, he replied, and rolled over and went back to sleep.

And that’s it. That’s the moment that is seared into my memory. It feels like an important conversation for both myself and the child, but beyond that, it feels like an important conversation for any of us, regardless of age. Because what *is* prayer, really? What does it mean to direct our thoughts and intentions towards something that cannot be grasped in words alone? And how does the framework offered to us by our teachers, parents, clergy, and other role models influence our attitudes towards prayer?

For that child, my words were simple truth. He accepted them, rolled over, and fell back asleep. But for me, with my brain and heart immersed in Jewish tradition and liturgy, my response felt almost like a cop-out, an oversimplification, like I was skating around the truth. I felt like I had skirted the question, and neatly avoided some of the more complicated aspects of Jewish prayer.

Let me explain. We Jews are the stewards of a tradition that uses words like “obligation” and “fulfill” when we talk about all aspects of sacred life, including prayer. These words send the message that there is a correct and also an incorrect frequency and content of prayer. We also have certain rituals that have been done a certain way for so long, and accompanied by certain words over so many generations, that part of their power comes from the fact that they haven’t changed for so long. Their consistency binds us to our own history, and to other Jews around the world. In

this sense, there can indeed be a “right” or “wrong” way to pray, in terms of complying with custom and established practice.

However, we are also, on a basic level, just humans like anyone else. We have an emotional need to cry out to God, just like anyone else from any other tradition, in a way that transcends any commandment or schedule. The urge to pray, and the need to pray, might strike us at any time.

And we have many stories in our tradition-- stories of Channa, of Moses, of Abraham, of Jacob, of many other ancestors we know and love-- who cried out to God, who argued and fought with God, who had intimate moments of confusion and loss shared only between them and the Divine. Now, I wasn't there personally, but I'm pretty sure that these ancestors didn't only use the words of Siddur Sim Shalom.

So how are we supposed to reconcile our human need to connect with the Divine on the terms of our own hearts with our religion's sacred rules and regulations?

Aren't we obligated to be true to our own hearts as well as to tradition?

IS there a right and wrong way to pray in Judaism?

In his 1992 book, *The Five Love Languages*, author Gary Chapman posits that all people give and receive love in five main ways. These five love languages are: words of affirmation (for example, telling your spouse that you love them and are proud of them), quality time (sitting in the same room reading books together on the couch), giving gifts (whether wrapped in tissue paper or a flower picked on a walk), acts of service (like driving someone to the doctor or taking out the trash), and physical touch (whether romantic touch or just reaching out and holding someone's hand to reassure them).

For most people, Chapman says, though some of these “love languages” play a stronger role than the others in their relationships, all of them are important in their own way, and it’s important to pay attention and learn which love languages are strongest for you and for the other people in your life.

Chapman’s book was a runaway success. In fact, it’s been on the New York Times bestseller list for over a decade straight, and has spawned numerous spin-offs including a version tailored to military families and another to be used in workplace and professional relationships.

This past week, we celebrated Tu B’av, sometimes known as “Jewish Valentine’s Day”. And in honor of Tu B’av, I thought that maybe we could explore how Chapman’s concept of the five love languages might help us resolve our conundrum: of how to balance the desire we have to pray as our spirit moves us with our

desire to honor tradition and remain bound to other Jews throughout time via sacred and regulated rituals.

Let's start with our central prayer, the Shema. When we say the Shema every day, we include the V'ahavta, which we just chanted together this morning. Every day, we say: v'ahavta et adonai elohecha; b'chol levavcha, u'b'chol nafschecha, u'b'chol meod'cha. You, yes, you, are commanded to love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and your soul, and your might.

But the thing is, *your* heart is not the exact same as *my* heart, and *your* soul is unique to you, and *your* might-- your strengths-- are different from anyone else's. Yet we all must love God-- so how should we proceed? Are we all obligated to love God and pray to God identically?

Well, yes. And, no.

For the purpose of this sermon, I'd like to propose the Five Languages of Prayer in Judaism, based directly off of Chapman's Five Love Languages. For example:

Perhaps, for those of us for whom words of affirmation are the strongest way we show love, it will be through the words of our siddur that we find the greatest connection to God. Perhaps we will write our own poems, as have generations of Jews before us, and our own songs. For these Jews, it can be incredibly powerful to know that in synagogues on the other side of the world, our spiritual siblings are saying the exact same phrases that we are. Similarly, the Aramaic of kaddish, thousands of years old, provides a common linguistic thread to our ancestors. Words of affirmation are a completely valid language of prayer in our tradition.

Perhaps, for those of us for whom quality time is the strongest way we show love, showing up and being here with community and making a minyan is our most powerful love language. Perhaps we pray with our bodies by working behind the scenes, sitting on committees, marching in protests, volunteering in the kitchen, and showing mourners that they are not alone. Indeed, quality time is a completely valid language of prayer in our tradition.

Perhaps, for those of us for whom gift giving is the strongest way we show love, giving generously, via tzedakah and donations to shuls and Jewish organizations here and in Israel are how we prefer to show love for our tradition. Our ancestors offered sacrifices, physical gifts to God and benefitting the kohanim, showing that they understood that gift giving is a legitimate love and prayer language in Judaism.

Perhaps, for those of us for whom physical touch is how we show love, we might revel in the bodily rituals of Judaism, like wrapping ourselves in tefillin and in a tallit. We might look forward all year to dancing on Simchat Torah with the scroll wrapped in our arms, or volunteer for the chevra kadisha to lovingly prepare bodies for burial. We fast on Yom Kippur and feel our dedication in every pang of hunger. Indeed, physical touch is a completely valid language of prayer in our tradition.

And finally, for those of us for whom acts of service are our preferred way to show love, Judaism-- and Har Shalom-- offer ample opportunity. Who pours the kiddush juice into tiny cups each week? Who sits at the doorway and greets every person who enters the sanctuary with a smile? Who puts up the sukkah each year, or chants the Haftarah each week? Yes, each and every one of these acts of service, when carried

out with love and dedication to Judaism, is a completely valid language of prayer in our tradition.

....This leaves us in an interesting predicament-- all of these love languages are important to Judaism. And yet, we can't all excel at all of these languages of prayer to the exact same extent all the time. Judaism would grind to a halt if everyone wanted to be a rabbi, or everyone wanted to be on the Board, or every single person wanted to be a greeter or a kiddush organizer every single week.

Please don't misunderstand me, though-- if every one of you wants to show up this Monday and Thursday at 8 AM to help make a minyan, you are MORE than welcome, and we need you!

But my point is this: it's about balance, about knowing ourselves, and about honoring the many ways each of us has the opportunity to show our love for God and

live up to the commandments contained in the V'ahavta. We are obligated to love, yes, but that love will look slightly different for each of us-- and will also always overlap in certain ways, like it does every time we chant the ancient words of the Shema together, as ritual and tradition ask of us.

But it's up to you to figure out, in addition to that, what your personal Jewish love language is, what your personal prayer language is. I guarantee you, the committees at Har Shalom will be thrilled when you call them up to volunteer time, money, donations, your presence, and/or expertise. Our Minyanaires will be thrilled when you show up to make a minyan, as will be the people who need to say kaddish. Our children will benefit from having a shul that is vibrant and alive with members who are giving and living and loving from the heart, bringing their full selves with them into this building instead of leaving our personal love languages outside.

B'chol levavcha, u'b'chol nafshecha, u'b'chol
meodecha. With all of YOUR heart, and YOUR soul,
and YOUR might.

What is prayer, the preschooler asked?

Talking to God, I said.

But I'd like to go back and add-- prayer is talking to
God, but not everyone talks to God with words.

Shabbat Shalom.