

## **How to Pray**

### **Rosh Hashanah 5775 Day I AM**

I don't know what possessed me to invite congregants to suggest topics for my High Holiday sermons this year, but I did invite and some did suggest. One repeated suggestion pertained to prayer as a topic. The way one congregant put it:

...the CBI community might profit if you shared with us, on the holidays, how we might get better at learning how to pray. That is, not how Jews are supposed to pray, but how we, real people in Cville, can practice learning how to pray, and how we can start to put it to work over the many hours we spend in shul over the holidays.

Since I was asked, I am going to tell you all how to pray or how to learn how to pray and then you will know and then we can move on to other simple topics, including, how make life meaningful, how to age gracefully, how to make peace between Israel and her enemies, how to make peace elsewhere in the Middle East and in the world, how to make get members of the opposing political parties in this country to work together, how to ensure Jewish continuity into the next generation, how to increase the sense of connection and affection between American Jews and Israel, and how to reverse the effects of global warming and other ecological threats. I put forth this list in a sarcastic tone not to dismiss the topic but rather to admit that I find it daunting, at once too important and too complex to deal with adequately in this setting. Regarding its complexity, I would venture that, in this congregation, attitudes about prayer and how it works, if it works, when and why it does or does not, vary to such a high degree that it would be presumptuous of me to say much of anything and imagine it could apply broadly. And yet I do not want to avoid the topic. So I will offer some reflections about prayer, how to pray, about learning how to pray and my own evolving prayer life in the hope that some of what I say might resonate with some of you.

To begin with the obvious, the setting of Rosh Hashanah morning commends itself as a setting for a reflection on prayer because more of us find our way to shul on this day than usual and while there we usually pick up siddurim and at least appear to pray. Not only that, but prayer plays a significant role both in the Torah and Haftara readings this morning. First, in the heartrending scene in this morning's Torah portion, Hagar pleads to God when she fears for the life of her son, saying, "let me not see the child's death." Following these words, Hagar positions herself at a distance from her son [perhaps not wanting him to see her express such desperation?] and wordlessly cries out, causing an immediate and

comforting heavenly response. In the Haftara, Hannah, bereft over her inability to conceive, pours out her heart in a stream of spontaneous, petitionary prayer that is entirely misunderstood by the institutional representative, the Priest, Eli, as a display of drunkenness. We institutional types often get confused when we witness unvarnished, authentic versions of the piety we claim to promote. Not only is Hannah's prayer heard in the form of her subsequent pregnancy but the rabbis of the Talmud come to interpret her prayer as the gold standard, the model for communal prayer, prayer that balances pre-existing structure with spontaneity, *keva* with *kavvana*, to use the traditional Hebrew terms, let's call them fixed form and mindfulness.

A little more on the human terrain I would map out for this topic: For many of us, prayer, no matter what we mean by the term, does not come easily. And yet, while we may well feel challenged by or inhibited from or incapable of offering prayer, at the same time, we often have at least an inkling that prayer occupies or should occupy a central practice within Judaism, not to mention every other religious system, and that prayer has something to do with feeling connected to God, whatever one means by God, and that prayer should somehow express something real and authentic and important about one's life and, moreover, that a life devoid of prayer may be an impoverished life. So the challenge becomes what to do when prayer seems important but I do not how or where to begin?

So too, some of us feel resistant to prayer despite or because we have strong Jewish backgrounds or strong backgrounds in other faith traditions and therefore have acquired significant, negative experiences; we have experienced prayer as meaningless, boring, inaccessible, trite, unmusical, overly orchestrated, in an incomprehensible language, in an overly familiar language, too wordy, or too wordless. Some of us, for better or worse, have no such baggage to weigh us down but have yet to find points of contact between the rich spiritual lives we wish to nurture and the words we find in the prayer book.

Others, though, possess a background in Jewish prayer practice or the practice of other traditions and these provide helpful skills or attitudes. These folks have experienced in the practice of traditional prayer moments of connection, moments where something important, something from deep within, something that required expressing found its voice; for them, something called prayer has happened and that it has happened at least once gives them the confidence that it can happen again. Such folks know that if they can successfully encourage in themselves openness to such prayer experience, their lives will be enriched beyond measure.

To further color in the map of our prayer terrain, some of us can achieve a prayerful disposition but only in private. Others can do it but only in community. Some require a place designated for prayer, a sanctuary of some sort. Others do far better in the woods, on the beach, by a water fall, or on a mountain summit. And then, not to ignore a possible conceptual factor: for some, uncertainty about God or one's own belief, or whether one can possibly pray effectively absent confidence that there is someone listening, such doubt can serve as a source of resistance. Without firm faith in a listening deity, some may ask: "how can I pray?"

Having already admitted the impossibility of addressing the matter comprehensively or even adequately, let me share a little about my evolving prayer practice.

This past summer, I had the splendid fortune to experience a week of contemplation and kayaking in the Inside Passage of Southeast Alaska, during a retreat I described last evening. One morning, our designated teacher of Torah, a young rabbi named Jordan Bendat-Appell, spoke about his personal history with Jewish prayer. He said that as a younger man, he had come to view prayer as a rusty car. By Jewish prayer, he meant not the spontaneous or privately composed prayers or outpourings of the heart that Jewish tradition invites and encourages, but the ones we find in prayer books. These prayers had come to seem to him like a rusty car. You know the one I mean, the rusty car that sits on blocks on the front lawn of certain rural homesteads, a car that used to work, that used to take people places. But now, that rusty car has no engine, many other parts missing and cannot take you anywhere. Jordan's rusty car was there before he was born. But he was told (by his parents and by his rabbi) that the rusty car is important and not only must he not remove it but he must schlep it around with him in his travels.

At one point, Jordan recalls saying to himself: "This is ridiculous! Why am I schlepping this old junk heap around with me? It is heavy, ugly, a huge burden, and it does not work! Nothing about this old, rusty car justifies the effort." And so, Jordan stopped lugging the rusty car of Jewish prayer around and began to nurture his spiritual side in less burdensome ways. Fast forward. "Now," says Jordan, "I view Jewish prayer as a formerly rusty car." Jordan has installed a new engine, has done needed body work, and has refurbished the car with new parts, some replacements, and some that it never had before. He now drives the car and it takes him where he wants to go.

The rusty car image has much resonance for me. Once upon a time, years ago, before choosing a path that would lead me to an engaged Jewish life and then a rabbinic career, I too had come to regard Jewish prayer as pointless, empty of meaning, even hypocritical, and certainly hardly worth the time or effort. Like Jordan, I have evolved, in part by learning that I could make demands of prayer and of myself, by posing such questions as these:

Where do I want to go in my life and where do I want my prayer to take me?

What kind of refurbishing might be needed of the prayers or of me so that my Jewish prayer can take me where I want to go?

As I began to make demands of prayer and of myself, I arrived at a few key attitudes that have informed my evolving practice. In agreement with Rabbi Jordan, I came to insist that prayer must enhance meaning; prayer must be real and have a purpose beyond that of obedience to parental or rabbinic voices insisting that I schlep it around like a heavy, engine-less, rusty car. Prayer must work and must take me somewhere life-enhancing.

On the other hand, I have learned that it serves me well to cultivate a disposition of patience when prayer seems remote or inaccessible or meaningless. Often, I have discovered that it pays to give these artifacts of the past the benefit of the doubt. In the way fine literature or music or art might require some effort toward the cultivation of a discerning eye or ear on my part before I can penetrate their mysteries and arrive at their many treasures, so too with Jewish prayer. For example, I have had to get beyond the insufficient Hebrew I acquired in my childhood. I have had to learn to resist the instinct to think about prayer as a kind of passive entertainment, to overcome the wrongly considered question “is this experience working for me?” when I need to be asking first “what kind of effort is called for by me right now so that this experience can work?” In other words, although prayer can take place without a lot of caloric expenditure it cannot take place effectively without considerable effort to pay attention to one’s mood, one’s inner voice, the quality of one’s attention, at least these.

You probably recall the guy who when asking “how do I get to Carnegie Hall?” was told “practice, practice, practice!” To say the obvious: effective, real, authentic prayer, prayer that gives voice to inner yearning, that prayer, I have discovered, requires cultivated skill and cultivated skill requires practice. Let me suggest three practical rubrics that I have come to employ on a daily basis.

**First: Prayer as contemplative practice:** I want my prayer to be real. What do I mean? Reb Zalman Schachter-Shalomi of blessed memory [*Making Prayer Real*, p. 67] spent much effort in translating the ancient prayers found in traditional prayerbooks so that contemporary, spiritually seeking Jews would find them relevant. But he once lamented: “People have used my translations of Hebrew prayers and wrecked them, because they make them for the eyes, to look good on the page. I make them for the mouth. When you make it for the mouth, you move from the cerebral into the affective level. If the ear hears what the mouth is saying, then the mouth will be saying what the heart wants to say.” If the ear hears what the mouth is saying, then the mouth will be saying what the heart wants to say. So, I would say that prayer is real when the ears hear what the mouth says and when the mouth says what the heart intends.

So, if I want my prayer to be real, if I want my ears to hear what my mouth says and my mouth to say what my heart intends, I need to allow myself the space to listen to my inside, to notice whether it is full of joy or anguish or anger or pain or brokenness or loneliness or confusion or fear or worry or boredom or ambivalence or emptiness or fullness or some or all of the above. What calls for expression at this moment? Where those calls for expression align with words in the siddur, those words can serve as wings for my *Avodah Shebalev*, my worship of the heart, my real prayer. And where those calls for expression find their own shapes, their own worded or wordless form, those shapes also comprise *Avodah Shebalev*, real prayer.

Furthermore, regarding prayer as contemplative practice, Rabbi Larry Kushner says [86]: “Prayer helps me to observe, sometimes, what’s going on in my own head. Because it’s memorized, I don’t have to think about it. And that means that if I suddenly start thinking about my uncle [during prayer], I think to myself, why am I thinking about my uncle? Where’d that come from? So prayer becomes an opportunity for self reflection, self purification, self understanding and obviously the goal is to transcend oneself.”

Perhaps it goes without saying but for prayer to serve as a contemplative practice, one does well to develop the capacity to shut out the external noise, to still extraneous inner voices, to be silent, as in the manner we described yesterday evening. As already admitted, I have found fostering the capacity to be silent to be both essential and often difficult. **Regarding silence, the second practical rubric I recommend for learning how to pray**, Rabbi Kushner recalls another teaching of Reb Zalman [77]: “...that when you are done praying, you need to sit down and be still, because that’s as much a part of the prayer as when you are making noise.

Zalman says that it may or may not be true that God answers prayers, but most of us hang up before we give God a chance to answer.” So don’t hang up so quickly. Wait for an answer. Sometimes, I find, responses do come.

**As a third rubric and this will be enough for now**, I have adopted a gratitude practice at least once every day. Even without certainty that there is a God who listens to one’s prayer, you can generate certainty that you have in your life blessings for which you are grateful and people for whom you are grateful. Rabbi David Ingber credits Reb Zalman, again, of blessed memory, for teaching that the daily practice [p. 57] of gratitude or praise not only “uncovers the everyday gifts of life” but, said Reb Zalman, “gratitude is like wifi. You can use it to log in anywhere, anytime.” I try to take a moment at least once every day to log in to the everyday gifts in my life. Right now, as we sit here, you could conjure up an aspect of your life for which you are grateful. Right now, as we sit here, you could conjure up the image of one person for whom you are grateful. With a few more seconds, you could even compose words that express the gratitude you bear for that person in your life or for that aspect of your life.

I have found that when I practice gratitude by allowing one or more of the many prayers of gratitude found in the prayer book to focus my grateful attention or by simply allowing the awareness of gratitude to arise and find its own means of expression, I become less agitated, more joyful, less worried, more hopeful, less weary, more alert, less distracted and more engaged. I have found that the practice of gratitude is effective medicine and has absolutely no negative side effects.

To conclude, as practical means for making prayer real, I have found a contemplative approach, moments of stillness, and the practice of gratitude to work. I have found them to be essential elements in refurbishing that rusty and engineless old hulk of a car sitting up on blocks in the front lawn. With patience, persistence and discipline, I trust that your efforts toward making your prayer real will work for you as well.