

“It’s Okay to Strike Out”  
Sermon: Parshat Tzav  
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Last week we were fortunate to spend the weekend with Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, our Scholar-in-Residence. In case you were not here last week, Rabbi Diamond is a professor of Talmud at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, where all of B’nai Israel’s rabbis, myself included, were ordained. Within those walls of JTS, Rabbi Diamond is an accomplished scholar and a teacher who helps his students unravel complex Talmudic disputes. But last weekend was not about Talmud. Rather, Rabbi Diamond came to teach us about prayer, and to model for us the ways in which we might come to experience the Divine Presence through our prayer and davening lives. Inspired by what he had to say, I want to share with you a little more about my own personal prayer-life.

First of all, davening, or praying, is not easy. Nor is it natural. We are not born with an innate ability to pray in a way that deeply connects us with the Divine Presence each and every time. Rather, prayer is something that we must practice. It is a skill that we must cultivate, and that we must develop over time. Like other valuable and useful skills, prayer demands from us both learning and investment. As Jews, we spend a lot of time and energy thinking about and engaging in prayer. The majority of the Shabbat morning service is about praying. Our prayers take different forms. Sometimes we offer praise of God for creating this incredible world and everything in it. Other times we give thanks for the wonders of our lives—for having clothing, shelter, food, and health. And in yet other moments we ask God for assistance and support, acknowledging that we alone are not masters of our destinies. Sometimes we walk away from

prayer feeling like it worked, that we were able to express ourselves and connect to the Divine in a meaningful way. And at other times we walk away feeling frustrated or simply unmoved by the experience. And for that you should not feel bad. You should not give up. You should not be ashamed, embarrassed, or defeated because prayer did not work in this particular instance.

To help illustrate this, I offer an analogy for those of you who are prayer-seekers, for those who strive to be in relationship with God and feel spiritually moved by the experience of participating in prayer. To be clear, I am not speaking only about those who lead prayer, nor am I being specific about Jewish prayer per se. Rather, I speak to all who come to synagogue and other houses of worship seeking a relationship with God.

Prayer, my friends, is like baseball. An MLB all-star batter typically has a batting average somewhere in the low .300s. That means that he only has a hit once out of every three times he gets up to bat. Remember, that he has multiple at-bats per game, and that during the regular season, he plays multiple games each week. He does this same thing over and over again, and he practices in between each of those games, and if he manages to hit the ball successfully once out of every three times, then he's a great batter. Let that sink in—1 out of 3.

The same is true for prayer. Observant Jews follow a routine in which they pray three times each day—four on Shabbat and holidays. Still, if you do it three times a day, you can reasonably expect to have only one successful, spiritual moment. That means that if you show up to synagogue every Shabbat, which is a significant and laudable commitment in and of itself, you can reasonably expect to have one spiritually meaningful prayer experience each month.

Now, don't be disappointed. I am by no means trying to discourage prayer. Nor am I saying that it is so difficult that you shouldn't bother trying. Rather, this analogy is my way of

telling you that it is okay to strike-out, it is perfectly okay *not* to feel spiritual every time you pray. I want to give you all permission to have reasonable expectations. I intend all of this as a liberating thought, not a discouraging one.

Personally, I pray 2-3 times a day, and I do not have a .300 batting average. There are days, sometimes weeks that go by where I do not feel spiritually moved by prayer. But that doesn't mean I give up. It doesn't mean that I walk away from the endeavor. I still arise the next morning, don my tallit and my tefillin, open the *siddur*, and offer my most sincere prayers to God. Striking out doesn't mean I am ejected from the game forever. Rather, it means that I must find new strategies, new tools to do better next time. I stay in the game and I take every opportunity at bat because I know that eventually I will get that hit, I will make contact, and I will have another meaningful experience of God's Presence in my life.

One of Rabbi Diamond's refrains last week was that we must be willing to open ourselves up to experiencing God's Presence. He told us that he no longer speaks about *belief* in God, but rather he speaks about *experience* of God. Rather than getting hung up on complicated theological discussions about God's Presence, or lack thereof, in this world, Rabbi Diamond encouraged us to consider how we might experience God personally in our lives, particularly through prayer. This led me to ask the question: How do I open myself up to experiencing God's Presence? The answer is that I must cultivate a profound sense of humility, or even stronger, I must cultivate a sense of *vulnerability*. But being vulnerable can be terrifying. In our Western and American society, cultivating an inner sense of vulnerability is counter-cultural. We are raised to demonstrate stoicism and fortitude. We are conditioned to think that displays of feelings and emotions are signs of weakness and insecurity. But that

cannot be further from the truth. The truth is that when we demonstrate our true feelings, we are being open and honest about who we are and what are. We are making sure that our outsides correspond to our insides. In so doing we overcome the inclination to suppress our truest selves. We push back against these warped ideas of strength, to show how empowered we really are. Being vulnerable is not the same as being weak. Being vulnerable is being honest with ourselves and with those around us. Being vulnerable is a critical component of developing a meaningful relationship with God. Vulnerability is not the opposite of strength—it is the opposite of hubris, excessive self-confidence, and arrogance. I can be a strong, empowered, and successful person, and simultaneously be humble, modest, and open-minded. When we are vulnerable, we can open ourselves up to new ideas, to new experiences, and to new ways of thinking about the world. Being vulnerable prepares us to succeed when we pray.

I say all of this, really, by way of introduction. I want to offer you all this one tool, one new strategy, that will hopefully help you in your own prayer lives, and thereby raise your spiritual batting average. The model for this strategy comes from this week's *parsha*.

Parshat Tzav consists of instructions for various kinds of sacrificial animal offerings, brought to the Tabernacle for particular reasons. Some of these were offerings to atone for wrongdoing, and others were simply gestures of goodwill towards God and the community. In their Divrei Torah this morning, Sean and Emerson both noted that sacrificial worship is not the *goal* of Jewish life. It wasn't that way for the ancient Israelites, and it certainly is not the case for us today. Rather, animal sacrifice was one tool, one method of drawing closer to God. But it was just that, one tool out of many, part of a larger system of religious life, and it was meaningful to our people at that time. And yet, when the ancient Temple in Jerusalem was

destroyed nearly two thousand years ago, the circumstances changed. The ancient rabbis of the Talmud traded the Temple's service of sacrifice for the synagogue's service of the heart. They helped transform the Jewish tradition from one of sacrificial worship, to one of prayer and good deeds. For that, modern Jews should be ever-grateful that our ancient tradition was able to evolve in the face of unprecedented circumstances. However, something was lost in that transformation, and we must now work a little bit harder to regain it.

The Rambam, Maimonides, teaches that the animal sacrifices were meant to arouse within the individual a particular feeling. Imagine that you are bringing forth an offering of your own to the Jerusalem Temple which stood two thousand years ago. You have led this small goat all the way from your village, a full day's walk from Jerusalem. And then you look on as the animal is taken by the *kohen*, the priest, slaughtered and then placed on the altar and engulfed before you in flames. The Rambam suggests that this is supposed to be a disturbing image. We are meant to have a visceral response to it, and we may even feel that in just hearing the description. Looking on as the animal is offered, we are supposed to internalize the message that this animal has been sacrificed in place of me.<sup>1</sup> We are offering God a ransom for ourselves, and God accepts that animal sacrifice instead of taking our own lives for wrongdoing. Watching this scene unfold in the ancient Temple must have been difficult. And that was the point. You were supposed to think to yourself, "Wow, that could have been me." Those sacrifices were supposed to help cultivate and maintain a sense of humility and vulnerability. But sacrificial worship is a thing of the distant past, and let me reassure you that I am not

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<sup>1</sup> See Mitzvah #95: The Mitzvah of Building the Holy Temple.

advocating that we bring it back. Yet the question remains, how do we cultivate this vulnerability without the sacrificial service?

In one of the early morning prayers of the *siddur* we say, לְעוֹלָם יְהִי אָדָם יָרָא שָׁמַיִם בְּסִתְּרָהּ, וּבְגִלּוּיָהּ, A person should always be in awe of God, both in private and in public. In other words, how we behave and what we show of ourselves to the world should, ideally, correspond with what is inside of us. We are obligated to be honest with ourselves. When we stand before God in prayer, we have the opportunity to do that risk-free. In front of others, we shy away from being vulnerable. We, or at least I, struggle to tell others how I really feel and what is really going on inside of me. Standing before God, I need not have those fears. I can be myself, I can be open, honest, and vulnerable. I can tell it how it is. If I am feeling joyous and celebratory, I channel that in my prayers and give thanks to God. If I am angry, frustrated, and upset, I channel those emotions too, and God is strong enough to take it. Our relationship with the Divine is one that can withstand the most trying times. Friends enter our lives and fade away. Unfortunately, the same may happen with family members. But the Jewish tradition teaches that God does not abandon us, even when we abandon God. We might turn away at times, but we need not feel so guilty that we are unable to return. God is always willing to take us back.

Therefore, I can be myself, and I can practice being vulnerable. Each time that I pray is an opportunity to open myself up and be vulnerable once again, because it is safe to do that with God. So, in this post-sacrificial world, I encourage you all to pray, to daven, and to do it regularly. I encourage you all to be brutally honest with God about what is going on inside of you. I encourage you to cultivate this sense of vulnerability in prayer, and remember that prayer is a practice, and, like baseball, practice makes perfect. Shabbat shalom.