

Engaging in Active Prayer - Yom Kippur 5773

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Just before Rosh Hashanah, the chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Arnold Eisen, wrote a piece for Tablet Magazine in which he compared the synagogue to a concert hall. It wasn't a very flattering comparison. He didn't focus on the quality of the music or the hours of preparation by the rabbis and cantors and conductor and Torah readers and instrumentalists. He didn't even mention the cost of the tickets. Instead he mused about the audience, which seems a little too reserved in both places.

He cited an article by Richard Dare, in which the new CEO and Managing Director of the Brooklyn Philharmonic suggested that perhaps concert goers should be encouraged to clap along and be a little more active during performances. Describing a recent trip to a concert hall Dare wrote, "I found myself a bit preoccupied by all the shushing and silence and stony faced non-expression of an audience presumably enraptured, certainly deferential, possibly catatonic."

Chancellor Eisen suggested a similar critique of the typical synagogue during the high holy days. "Sometimes," he wrote, "The prohibition against showing too much emotion— laughing aloud or crying out, moving our feet repeatedly, getting up and walking around – actually gets in the way of feeling the feelings that the prayers are designed to elicit and express."

It wasn't always this way. The push for decorum in services came mostly in the 19th century, when synagogue leaders – many of them embarrassed by the noise and lack of decorum in old world synagogues – tried to re- package our traditions and liturgy with the trappings and style of the Protestant high church. And that wasn't entirely a bad thing – we don't need to accommodate people chewing tobacco during services as they once did; and I think the skilled chanting of the professional Hazzan adds beauty to our services.

But there would be a definite benefit to abandoning some of our decorum in favor of more participation, more engagement, and more activity and noise. Our traditional prayer service is much more about the individual worshipper than about the leaders. It doesn't matter if you are on the same page as I am or standing when I am standing as much as if you are engaged yourself with the prayers. After all, the Hebrew word for "to pray", *l'hitpallel*, is reflexive: Prayer is supposed to be an opportunity for exploring the self and pondering God's and the tradition's role in our lives, not sitting silently as the rabbi and cantor go about the business for us.

On Yom Kippur, I can imagine another benefit of a little more activity. At this point in the day, I'm not the only one who is getting a little hungry. It is difficult to maintain focus if you sit and listen as you are doing now for the entire day. Of course I should be careful in how I say this, because being more active and less deferential does not mean that the service is the best place to be discussing the pennant race.

But we need to learn how to pray better. Part of the secret is to take advantage of opportunities like the Learner service we are going to have this Saturday or the Gold Kippah program we offer to children in order to incentivize their learning to chant the prayers. Part of the solution is to try to pray more often – in the synagogue or at home, using a *siddur* or reciting our own spontaneous words. But more than that, we need to be a little more active. Some say the Yiddish word *daven* comes from the Hebrew word *doveiv*, which means to move the lips. Prayer means being active, moving the lips, not just observing and listening.

The 17th century scholar Leon of Modena looks at the activity of prayer this way.¹ Imagine a person sitting on a boat on a lake, pulling himself, by means of a rope, back to shore. In some respect it might appear that he is pulling the shore closer, but of course it is only the boat that moves. In a similar vein, people think that the purpose of prayer is to move God, when in fact the purpose is to move ourselves. We are the boats – ever moving; and God is the shore. You can see using this analogy that prayer doesn't work if we sit and wait. "Attending" services is not enough. We have to be actively engaged in what's going on.

Of course engagement doesn't mean believing everything that's written in the Torah or agreeing with every idea in the Machzor. I regularly encounter people who have great difficulty connecting to our ancient liturgy – and in the emotional moments before Yizkor, the feeling can be more profound. It's not just the Hebrew that's difficult, but also the language of prayer and the metaphors that are used. My colleague in Toronto, Rabbi Phil Scheim, calls it an Unetaneh Tokef moment, which every person is bound to have at some point. When we experience illness or come face to face with tragedy and then we come to synagogue and hear that God judges every person individually: "On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die."

Many people hear these words and wonder: How can I recite such words when they feel so untrue? Bad things often happen to good people. Experience suggests that God doesn't literally judge and sinners are not always punished and righteous people are not always rewarded. And yet I also can't say it's all a lie; we can't discard the traditional prayerbook and start over.

We are left instead to acknowledge the disconnect, to engage with the liturgy, and sometimes to use a little poetic license to find deeper meanings in our prayers and their messages. Sometimes it's a bit uncomfortable, but active discomfort is far better than passive silence.

Rabbi Scheim points to the Yiddish story of Bontsha the Silent (*Bontshe Shveyg*), by Y.L. Peretz: Bontsha was a human being; he lived unknown, in silence, and in silence he died. ... When Bontsha was born no one took a drink of wine; there was no sound of glasses clinking. When he was confirmed he

¹ Cited in David Wolpe, *Floating Takes Faith*.

made no speech of celebration. And when the wind at last lifted him up and carried him to the Other Side, no one noticed, no one at all.

Ah, but in the other world it was not so! No! In Paradise the death of Bontsha was an overwhelming event. ... The most exalted angels, with the most imposing wings, hurried, flew, to tell one another, "Do you know who has died? Bontsha! Bontsha the Silent!"

The angels gathered to support Bontsha's quick passage to Paradise. He had lived a miserable life, but he never protested. "He was silent even when his father, raving drunk, dragged him out of the house by the hair and flung him into the winter night. ..." "He was silent even when his wife ran off and left him with her helpless infant. He was silent when, fifteen years later, that same helpless infant had grown up and become strong enough to throw Bontsha out of the house." "Even in the hospital, where everyone is allowed to scream, he remained silent. ... And never one murmur of protest against man, never one murmur of protest against God!"

The story is set as if his silence was to be praised until at the very end the heavenly judge criticizes Bontsha: "You never understood yourself. You never understood that you need not have been silent, that you could have cried out and that your outcries would have brought down the world itself." But still, Bontsha is given access to heaven and told he can have anything he wants. He can hardly contain his disbelief, but he finally responds, "What I would like, Your Excellency, is to have, every morning for breakfast, a hot roll with fresh butter."

Peretz continues: A silence falls upon the great hall, and it is more terrible than Bontsha's has ever been, and slowly the judge and the angels bend their heads in shame at this unending meekness they have created on earth.

For Peretz, Bontsha represented the Old World Jew, persecuted by history, experiencing many hardships, and usually accepting it, "led like sheep to the slaughter." Peretz criticizes those who respond to difficulty in silence. He criticizes those who don't expect more. He criticizes those who justify God by imagining a grand universal plan that we have no business questioning. He criticizes those who fail to imagine the world as it is supposed to be. An engaged believer doesn't hesitate to make noise, question God, and hope for more.

There is an amazing Midrash, which describes God's reaction to the destruction of the Temple. According to the Rabbinic understanding of history, God enabled the Babylonians to destroy the first Temple in response to the Jewish people's transgressions; but in this Midrash God regrets his decision.

באותה שעה בכה הקב"ה, And at that moment, the Holy One (as it were) began to cry. Accompanied by ministering angels and the prophet Jeremiah, God goes down to look at the Temple ruins, and when He sees it He shouts out, "בני היכן הם, My children, where are they? Where are my priests and Levites? Where are the people who exalt me?" But Jeremiah is not crying and God gets very angry. "I am today like a man who built a wedding canopy for his son only to see the child die inside it,"

God says, “And you do not feel the pain – either for me for My children? Go and call Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Moses out of their graves, because they understand how to cry!”

Even God is saddened by difficult events. Even God shouts out in despair, in anger, while the silent Jeremiah is castigated.

We can hear that voice of protest in the Bible as well, as when the psalmist acknowledges the disconnect between the world as it is supposed to be and the world as it is, between the God he was taught to believe in and the God of his experience. During this penitential season we recite Psalm 27, which includes the plea: “אל תסתר פניך ממני; אל תדחה עבדך.” Do not hide yourself from me; do not reject your servant.” The metaphor of הסתרת פנים, God’s hidden face is the language of protest. Many of us have felt that sense of abandonment. It is painful and we need not accept it in silence. We need to learn to call to God from out of the depths, ממעמקים, not always with resignation, but in protest and with hope.

Even Job, the biblical figure most identified with suffering. ... When he is stricken and his children are killed, Job does not remain silent. He shouts at God and curses the day he was born. Job’s friends try to comfort him. They warn him not to blaspheme God. They assert that a transgression somewhere in his background might explain his predicament. But Job refuses their advice. He continues to shout out in protest. And at the end of the story he is vindicated, as God tells Job’s friends, “I am very angry at you כי לא דברתם אלי נכונה כעבדי כאיוב, for you did have not spoken rightly about me as did my servant Job.” In spite of the cliché, the real Job was not patient. The real Job was not silent.

Sometimes active prayer means shouting out against God, making it clear that we expect more. And that is good. If God is really God, God can handle protest. God can handle or anger. Far better to be angry than to abandon God entirely and live in silence.

And there’s another kind of active prayer as well. I often describe our role as God’s partners in the continuing process of creating and repairing the world. To paraphrase Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, our job is not just to pray with our mouths, but also to pray with our feet and to pray with our hands.

The end of the Unetaneh Tokef may actually be a later addition to respond to one individual’s discomfort with the notion that God judges and we are powerless. “ותשובה ותפלה וצדקה מעבירין את רע; הגזרה; Repentance, prayer, and acts of kindness overturn the severity of the decree.” Pointedly the statement does not say that our actions can undo the course of history. But it does say that our actions are not meaningless. They make a difference in the way we encounter the world and they add meaning to the words we utter in prayer.

I am thinking of one member of our congregation who was having a hard time sitting in the hospital and dealing with her husband’s serious illness. She offered some prayers, but mostly she was filled with doubt as to whether the words could have any effect when God seemed so absent from her life.

She resolved to try something else as well. She heard that a friend was in another room and she went to visit. The visit brought comfort to both the patient and the visitor, and so she began to visit others. She tried to spend some time with the nurses and hospital staff as well. Bikkur Holim, the mitzvah of visiting the sick, became her signature *mitzvah*. And it became active prayer as well. If it didn't bring her close to God, it certainly did bring her a sense of godliness.

In the Haftarah that we read this morning, the Jewish people approach the prophet Isaiah with a familiar complaint about the disconnect between their expectations and reality. They have fasted, they have prayed, and they don't seem to feel God's blessings in their lives. The prophet responds that fasting is not enough, words are not enough. What is needed is active prayer. "This is the fast I desire," the prophet tells them. "To share your bread with the hungry, to take the wretched poor into your home; when you see the naked, to offer clothing; and not to ignore your own kin." This is active prayer. Not listening, not silence, but action.

The 19th century work *Ta'amei Hamitzvot* questions why in the Torah Shabbat is called "*Shabbat Shabbaton Ladonai*, A Sabbath of Sabbaths to the Lord", while Yom Kippur is called "*Shabbat Shabbaton Lakhem*, A Sabbath of Sabbaths for you." Its answer is that on Yom Kippur we have the opportunity to bring God's presence, to bring God's holiness down to earth. That is only possible with active prayer. It is not magic.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel used to tell a story, which I learned from Rabbi David Wolpe, about a blacksmith who apprenticed to his master. He worked hard to perfect his craft. Eventually he took over the trade, but his customers dwindled away. He went to the rabbi and asked why. The rabbi told him, "My child, you have learned your trade well. You can forge the metal, place the anvil and strike a smart blow with the hammer. But, alas, you have not learned to kindle the spark."

In prayer as in life, there is no substitute for passion, no substitute for that spark. We need that animating spark of gratitude or anger or emotion that encourages us to transcend our normal experience. Prayer books don't make a prayer experience any more than parenting books make a parent or cookbooks make a cook.

In these moments before Yizkor, as we feel the urge to try to make sense of the world we live in; on this holy day, as we yearn to find spiritual fulfillment in our time in the synagogue, may we discover new meaning in active prayer. May we engage with the words of our liturgy for good and not bad. Let us not be silent in our desire to feel God's presence. And let us take full advantage of our power to act, to make a difference, to bring God's Presence down to us on earth. *G'mar Hatimah Tovah*, May we inscribed and sealed for good in the book of life. Amen.