

“Finding A Place to Pray”
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How can we set aside a place in our lives for prayer? This is one of the great challenges of men and women in the increasingly hectic and clamorous world in which we live. All of us, at one time or another, discover the need for prayer, or recognize the value of prayer. Yet, prayer is a cultivated practice. It can be challenging to try to pray on the spur of the moment, without adequate preparation, without adequate habituation.

Habituation is the secret to the Jewish approach to prayer. All of us prize spontaneity. Certainly the rabbis did. They believed that a prayer service in which you didn't bring something fresh, something new, was hardly worthy of the name.

And yet, they insisted that we pray at fixed times, and that we have a liturgy before us. Not, paradoxically, to confine us, but to liberate us. If we know that we've set aside from 6:15 to 7:30 this evening, say, to pray, then we're not going to schedule anything else during that time. And if we know that there will be this collection of meditations, prayers and poetry in our hands, then we don't have to worry about what to focus on. It's right there in our hands. Habituation allows for spontaneity.

There is yet one more guideline that the rabbis provided us to help us make room in our lives for prayer, which I'd like to reflect upon this evening. In addition to telling us that we should set aside certain **times** for prayer, and we should say certain **words** during our prayers, they also told us that we should set aside certain **places** for prayer. The Talmud tells us quite clearly that we should establish a set place for our prayers. It goes on to say that “Anyone who establishes a set place for his or her prayers, the God of Abraham will assist him or her.” (See Berachot 7b, 6b)

Now that's all well and good, but unfortunately the Talmud doesn't make clear what is meant by establishing a set place for our prayers. In the medieval period following the completion of the Talmud, **four different explanations** of this evolved, which I want to share with you this evening, because I believe that all four of them are relevant to the work we need to do on Rosh Hashanah. I want to



thank Rabbi Levi Cooper or Pardes Institute in Israel for his beautiful elucidation of these four approaches.

The first explanation for “setting aside a fixed place for our prayers” is that **we have to find ourselves a synagogue, and go there regularly**. We have to associate with some community. Which community it might be is secondary, but it is essential that we find ourselves a community. This makes sense, doesn't it? Being a Jew is not just an individual activity. Judaism is lived in community. So many of the things we want to achieve—including prayer—we can't accomplish alone: we need the companionship, the shared contribution of others. Finding a synagogue community in which we can pray regularly is one way to assure that we will fulfill not only the individual responsibilities of being a Jew but the collective ones as well.

A second explanation of “setting aside a fixed place for our prayers” has it that it isn't enough to find ourselves a particular synagogue, a particular shul. **We need to find a particular spot *within* the shul to pray**. This is the origin of what is called one's “*makom kavua*,” one's place within the synagogue, within the sanctuary, where one customarily sits, stands, and prays. We all know about this phenomenon, don't we? Whether we come into the sanctuary only three times a year or each and every week, we have our favorite spots here, don't we? People have a natural tendency to choose the same spot, year after year. There are reasons for that. Coming back to that same spot --- there's a certain comfort in that. It brings us reassurance to know that, however much everything else in our lives may change, some things don't change.

But what is the religious explanation for this? There are several. According to one commentator, we have to find a fixed place within the shul to pray because in the days of the Temple, there was a very precise manner in which the sacrifices were offered. Just as the sacrifices were offered in a specific location, our prayers also should be recited in a designated spot.

Another commentator says that by taking the trouble to go to one's particular spot to pray, one is demonstrating commitment and intensity of purpose.

A third commentator suggests that a predetermined location for prayer increases the likelihood of concentration. Think of it this way: if you choose one year to sit on the left and on the next to sit on the right, your angle of sight is totally different. You'll be distracted. You'll focus too much attention on the new people in your new location, and less on the prayers.

Another explanation is this: a set location for prayer encourages regular attendance at the service. After all, if you have a set place, and you don't show up, people will start to ask about you. On the other hand, a person who does not have his or her own seat may feel less driven to show up, knowing that he or she will have to find a place to pray.

A medieval scholar known as the Rashba suggests that a reserved place for prayer invokes awe and respect. I am not so sure that's true. The opposite can also be the case. When people gather in the same corner of the shul year after year, it can create a familiarity that can lead to the opposite of awe. Nonetheless, that's his explanation for this practice.

The idea of finding a fixed spot in shul has in fact become a Jewish legal principle. One is supposed to find a specific place within the shul and pray from that spot. Of course, that does raise the question, what are you supposed to do if someone else arrives and, not knowing that it's your regular place, plunks him or herself down and begins to pray. I hope we all know what we're supposed to do, and what we're not supposed to do. We're not supposed to scowl or pout or moan. We're supposed to deal with it: find ourselves another spot, and just try to come earlier next time.

But there are two other possible ways to understand the Talmudic insistence that we find ourselves a set location for prayer that are also relevant for us.

One is that **we should designate a place in our homes** for our prayer. As it says in the Jerusalem Talmud, "Whoever designates a place in his or her house for his or her prayer, it is as if he or she has surrounded it with walls of iron."

What this tells us is that, in the days of the Jerusalem Talmud, it was more the practice for people to daven in their homes than at shul. There's something very powerful about having a place in one's home set aside for prayer. People who have had the misfortune of suffering a loss have often told me how powerful it has been to have services in their homes. Some people have said that they hadn't previously thought of their homes as places of prayer. We needn't wait until a loss occurs to have that experience. Think of it: what if each of us had a place in our homes to pray? A meditation room, a corner of a room, whether it be a dining room, a study or a bedroom, where we can pause and pray and meditate. This is, I believe crucial. Prayer should not be the exclusive province of the synagogue. Prayer needs to take place in the home. We should be reciting prayers before and after each of our meals, we should be reciting prayers when we light candles, so perhaps the dining

room is the natural place. Wherever it is, let us not banish prayer from our homes. Let's find a place within our homes as well as in the shul to commune with God.

Finally, there is a **fourth explanation** of the rabbinic dictum to find ourselves a fixed place to pray, and that is that **we should find ourselves a place outside of the walls of the synagogue, and outside the walls of our homes, in fact outside walls altogether**. We have to find ourselves a place out there, in nature, where we can commune with God.

Do you have such a place? I am sure we all do. It might be an isolated hilltop in the Berkshires or a North Shore beach or a quiet New Hampshire lake front or a beaver pond in Maine. Those places may be far from home. If so, we should try to find a few that are close to home, places where we can go in the morning before work, or in the late afternoon, or on a day off; places we can walk to on Shabbat. **We need to find God not only in the shul, not only in our homes, but in the world out there as well**. What happens in here cannot, must not be disconnected from the world out there.

Of course, the four paths offered here are not mutually exclusive. All of us, I believe, need community. We need to find a community in which to live, to grow, to celebrate, to grieve. Some of us here this evening are members here at Temple Aliyah. Others may not be. I hope that everyone here this evening will introduce yourself to your neighbors. If we're going to be praying together during these holidays we should certainly know each other. If you're a newcomer—and even if you're not—please stay around for a few minutes afterwards and introduce yourselves to me and to Glenn Levine, our congregational president.

Find a place, a specific place, to set yourself down and pray. Try, over the next two days, and again on Yom Kippur, to find a place free from distraction. Try hard not to overindulge that natural tendency of Jews who gather in shuls at this season of the year to engage in Jewish geography, to shmooze, to *kibbitz*. That's not to say that it is necessarily a bad thing, but let's try not to do it too much in here. Let's try to keep our focus, in this room at least, on the davenning, on the themes, on the essence of the High Holidays.

All of us should go back to our homes this evening and ask ourselves, "How connected am I with my community? Is it a true davening community for me? How involved am I? How involved can I try to be in the coming year?" We should ask ourselves, "What's my place there? Where's my fixed place for prayer?"

We should ask ourselves, “Where can I pray in my own home? Where is it safe, auspicious, uplifting to pray within my own home?” Let’s commit ourselves to finding a space in our own homes for meditation, for communion, for focusing on our spiritual needs.

We should also ask ourselves, “How can I connect what we’re doing here with the world outside?” Let’s never lose sight of the deep importance of nature to our spiritual and physical well-being. Let’s find places to which we can go to retreat from the hubbub of the worlds in which we live and work, places of silence and repose, places of prayer.

L’shanah Tovah Tikateivu. May the coming year be one in which all of us find these places devoted to prayer and are able thereby to enrich our prayer lives.

Amen.