

## Prayer

*Rosh Hashana 2009  
September 20, 2009  
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt*

In the spirit of the season, I have a confession to make. I think, though it may be best if I whisper it: Prayer is boring.

There. I have said it. I have put our dirty little secret out there.

I have admitted what many and maybe even most people may feel. Some may think it but not express it out loud. Clearly many vote with their feet by not coming to services.

It is like the minister who told a congregant he wanted him to enlist in the Army of the Lord. The guy said to his preacher, "I already did." The pastor said to him, "How can that be? I never see you at services." And the guy whispers to his minister, "that's because I'm in the secret service." Let's just say, we must have a lot of Jews in the Secret Service.

When I mentioned to one colleague that I was going to open my sermon with those words, he said to me: "Yashar Koah", meaning, "way to go."

If that is the case, why do we pray? Do I truly believe this? If so, what can or should we do about it?

Let me begin by qualifying and taking back some of my opening words. I know what you are thinking - I am being wishy washy, but in the famous words of Presidential candidate Walter Mondale, when asked if he was waffling on issues, "not necessarily."

When I was about 8 or 9 years old I was angry with my dad, for something or other. I don't recall the punishment or what it was that I had done that provoked the reaction. But I do remember that I put a note on his dresser with three simple rather direct, expressive words, meant to convey how I felt at the time. I wrote on a small piece of paper, "I hate you." A little later I had second thoughts about what I wrote. I wanted to go and retrieve the note, only I wasn't sure if he had seen it or not. I went into his room and saw that it was too late. The note had been moved to a different place. So since I couldn't take it back, instead I modified the note to make it less harsh. Right below what I wrote previously I added one word to attempt to mitigate and modify the harshness of the missive. I added the word, "sometimes."

So allow me to add a word to my opening statement: Prayer is boring, sometimes. And the question worth considering is when is it, and when is it not? How can we maximize the experience, and how do we create meaningful prayer experiences?

An article about prayer in the Sunday NY Times Magazine quotes Rabbi Marc Gellman as saying that no prayer is harder than suburban Jewish prayer. He explains that is because "our people don't get emotional in public." Rabbi Gellman is right. By our nature we are reserved, which limits our ability to act the way worshippers do in a black Baptist church.

So what can we do about our lack of passion?

At this point, it may be appropriate to offer some helpful advice to help make your worship experience more authentic. This guide is designed to boost your confidence in shul, so you can at least fit in and fake it. Follow this advice and no one will know that you have no idea what is going on.

1. The first thing you want to do is to try to find a seat behind someone who looks like they know what's going on. (You can identify such a person because they are likely to be mumbling to themselves under their breath and saying a few random words out loud every so often). This way you can casually glance over their shoulder every so often to see what page everyone is on, so come equipped.
2. Every so often, as you are looking at the pages of your siddur audibly recite an odd word, phrase or line out loud.
3. An important cautionary note: Don't jump up just because the person in front of you does so. He might just be stretching his legs. Instead, wait a moment until a significant proportion of the congregation is standing. There is a possibility that they all might be stretching their legs, but you won't look conspicuous, or out of place, which is a primary objective
4. You will notice a couple of guys near the front wandering around with an air of assurance, who look like they know what's going on. They are the shammosim. **AVOID EYE CONTACT WITH THESE PEOPLE** at all costs. Otherwise you may find yourself being asked to say something out loud in Hebrew in front of everyone.
5. The easiest way to look the part is to *shochel*. I have met people who have won international *shochelling* competitions without having a clue about where in the service they were. Advanced *shockellers* will even *shockel* when everyone else is sitting. (Of course, sometimes this may be a disguised leg-stretch). *Shochelling* is done mainly during the silent Amidah. This is about 10 pages during which you have no idea where everyone else is. All you do know is that if the others were really reading all the prayers they are supposed to be reciting they would be contenders for the world speed-reading record. You will know when the Amidah starts because everyone suddenly stands up, takes three steps back, then three steps forward, bows, and the place gets quiet. This is your cue to start *shochelling* while turning the pages of your prayer book approximately every 15 seconds. The end of the silent Amidah is signaled by everyone taking three short steps back, bowing to the left, the right and the center and then looking around to see if they won.

6. If the Rabbi is speaking in English and yet you can't understand what he's saying, this is the sermon. Looking like you are paying attention to the sermon will put you in the good graces of the rabbi. The formula is fairly simple: A reference to the Torah portion you have just heard plus something from local or national news concluding with the message that either "You should come to shul more regularly" or "Your home isn't kosher enough".

7. Feel free to talk to people near you at any time. Particularly appropriate and preferred topics of conversation are sports and business.

One final word of warning. If it goes well and you feel confident enough to go back for a second week you will be classified as a regular. This means there is a very good chance you could be asked to be the next Ritual Committee chairman.

Does this adequately describe some services you have attended? The problem is that too much worship is rote routine. The remedy is to seek to infuse it with meaning, with feeling and passion.

People are disconnected and find excuses not to pray. But the truth is, it is the other way around --- if you find excuses not to pray, and don't come to synagogue is when you feel disconnected.

Some are too busy and don't have the time to attend. Others contend it is just a bunch of words made up a long time ago which have nothing to do with our lives. It conflicts with soccer. It isn't relevant, meaningful or important. Besides, since we don't believe in God, what's the point? It's all in Hebrew, so why bother since we don't understand it.

It has been said that reading poetry or Shakespeare in translation is like kissing through a veil. The analogy is applicable to praying in a language other than Hebrew as well, since prayer is meant to be poetry. Yet Rabbi Gellman notes that one of the problems is when a large percentage of people at a religious service do not know how to pray, the quality of the experience is diluted.

So if prayer is boring, why not give up the whole enterprise? Here is where I must tell you I am not willing to turn my back on prayer. Allow me to explain why.

I remember being in Europe as a teenager with my parents. We went to shul on a Friday night so my mother could say kaddish for her father. I felt very uncomfortable because I was so unfamiliar with the traditional mode. I was alienated from the service, and had no idea what was going on. I did not know when to stand or sit. I sure could have used that ten point guide. And I remember feeling very sad because here I was, just one generation removed from my grandfather's mileu, in the country of his birth, and I was ignorant of the traditions that were second nature to him and that was his whole world.

Prayer is our people's expression, and I was lost. Thousands of years of continuity down the drain in just one short journey across the Atlantic to America. I knew something in my life was missing.

My encounter calls to mind the famous story of Franz Rozenzweig. While contemplating conversion to Christianity in the early 1900's, he decided to attend a synagogue in Berlin on Yom Kippur for the last time in his life so that he could comfortably leave the tradition of his ancestors. Something unanticipated occurred. He was so profoundly overcome by the piety and intense devotion of the worshippers as they sought forgiveness from God that he realized there was no need for him to find his salvation outside his ancestral faith. He proceeded to devote himself to Jewish studies, becoming one of the most important Jewish philosophers of the twentieth century and establishing in 1920 in Berlin the Lehrhaus where Jewish teachers of high renown lectured on many aspects of Jewish life and thought.

The potential is all here. We just have to be open to the experience.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of England recently edited a beautiful new prayerbook. In his moving introduction he writes, "We are a people defined by history. We carry our past with us. We relive it in ritual and prayer. We are not lonely individuals, disconnected with past and present. We are characters in the world's oldest continuous story, charged with writing its next chapter and handing it on to those who come after us. The siddur is, among other things, a book of Jewish memory."

As he puts it, "when we pray as part of a congregation we do so as members of a people who have served, spoken to and wrestled with God for longer and in more varied circumstances than any other in history."

I believe with all my heart that prayer is a significant and important Jewish act. We dare not forsake it. The pattern of weekly worship puts me in touch with Jewish heritage on a regular, ongoing basis. It is essential because it reinforces Jewish behavior, just as ritual and observance of Jewish law strengthens our ties to our people. When I am in shul I am connected to my community, to my fellow Jews, to God, to our heritage. All of this creates a strong religious identity, which is the antidote to assimilation and a bulwark against extinction.

Jewish prayer has to involve the worshippers. We shouldn't be passive when sitting in services. It is meant to be participatory, not a performance. If we want to be spectators we have the Kennedy Center or Strathmore Hall. This doesn't mean prayer can't or shouldn't be beautiful or uplifting, or devoid of drama and pageantry. I explain to our b'nai mitzvah, and I attempt to feel it every time we take the Torah out of the ark. It is as if we are standing at Mt Sinai again and reenacting what happened there.

Yehudah HaLevi the 11<sup>th</sup> century poet said that prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. We can live a life without music, or without color, but we would be missing a dimension of life.

Rabbi Sacks writes in his essay, "Prayer is the language of the soul in conversation with God." "The siddur is the choral symphony the covenantal people has sung to God across forty centuries, from the days of the patriarchs until the present day. In it we hear

the voices of Israel's prophets, its sages and scholars, poets and philosophers, rationalists and mystics, singing in calibrated harmony."

The real problem is passivity, primarily engendered by a lack of passion, sometimes fostered by ignorance. If we are involved and engaged, prayer is not boring. Many bar or bat mitzvah kids tell me after services they can't believe how quickly the service went when it is over. That is because they are involved and engaged in what is going on.

Remember the days after 9-11? Suddenly old words frequently repeated had new found meaning and relevance. As if to prove my thesis, on September 11, just a week ago, the headline on the front page of the Washington Post read, "9/11 as a Lesson, Not a Memory." Think about it. The implications are great. The challenge is how to pass on the memory of what happened to those too young to have any personal memory. This is the same dilemma the rabbis faced after the destruction of the Temple. And so they instituted rituals, and mitzvot, and emphasized deeds of lovingkindness and study. But the real thing that took the place of the sacrifices was prayer. It was seen as the way to draw near to God. And they brilliantly invented the synagogue and a new paradigm for encountering God.

A critical element of Jewish prayer also entails listening, listening to the longings of the ages, to the ethos of our heritage. The question is not just what we have to say to God, but what God has to say to us. What does God demand or expect of us? We find the answer along with our ideals in the liturgy. Prayer should be more about learning what to want than about trying to get what we want, or what we might think we need.

It will most likely not change the world, but that is not why we pray. More realistically, it may change the prayer, or at least have an impact on us and alter the individual's perspective. By way of example, parts of the service are praise and thanks. Admittedly, at times this is the part that can seem redundant, distant and superfluous. There is a message here though. The lesson it teaches is an important value all too often overlooked in society today: happiness comes from learning to give praise and expressing thanks to others. It reminds us to appreciate what we have and imparts a sense of humility.

Granted, watching a sports match may be more entertaining. But there is a place for prayer in our lives as well. There must be. As Rabbi Sacks writes, "Prayer opens our eyes to the wonder of the world. It opens our ears to the still, small voice of God. It opens our hearts to those who need our help. .. In that dialogue between the human soul and the Soul of the universe a momentous yet gentle strength is born."

How often during our busy week do we take the time to pause, to allow ourselves to be reflective and introspective, to connect to our Judaism? It is the perfect remedy for our busy lives, and it is most meaningful when one participates as a member of a community. The rabbis got it right when they mandated that the recitation of certain prayers necessitate a minyan to be recited out loud.

There are multiple dimensions to the experience -- the singing of the cantor, the traditional davening, the silent meditation, the personal individual thoughts, the congregational participation, the rabbi's sermon, the intellectual stimulation provided by the discussion of the Torah portion, the experience of being an individual in the midst of a congregation, perusing the prayerbook, looking at passages in the Bible, expressing gratitude to God, quietly meditating and asking of God the inner pleas of our hearts, aligning ourselves with the expectations of living a moral life, being reminded of ancient, yet eternal Jewish values, even when your mind wanders or ponders other things, and let's not forget the kiddish and the shmoozing.

While prayer might be boring sometimes, it has the potential to be exhilarating as well. We often don't realize that our reaction may be more of a reflection not just about the prayers or the service, but perhaps, may say more about us. So if we are bored, perhaps it says something about ourselves and how we approach things. As Ellen Parr wrote, "The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity."

A particular synagogue was very proud of its record of patriotism and of the high percentage of its members who enlisted to fight for freedom and to defend the nation. The rabbi noticed a child looking at the memorial plaques in the hallway and explained to the lad that this was very meaningful because it had the names of all the men and women who had died in the service. And the little boy asked the rabbi, "Which one? The morning or the evening service?"

A service should not be something to endure. It should have joy.

It doesn't come easy. I work at it. The remedy is to focus, to be even more intense, not just to give up, and this takes energy and effort. Too often we expect the gratification to be instantaneous, but as is true of anything in life, diligence and effort are required if we want to get anything out of it.

The rabbis suggested that we should always strive to say the words from our heart, with what is called kavanah. Before every bar and bat mitzvah service I tell our b'nai mitzvah and their families to think about one word, kavanah. I then explain that it refers to infusing our prayers with meaning, to being in the moment. It means, focus, concentration, and more.

There are obvious remedies - but we have to care enough to want to improve the experience.

For one, I suggest you read my book, *"God, Prayer and Spirituality."* Take one of our adult ed classes this year which will delve into the topic of prayer. If you don't feel comfortable or fluent reading the Hebrew, take a Hebrew reading class. Come to services, and bring a friend with you.

In case I have not yet convinced you of the efficacy of participating in prayer, consider this. An article entitled, "How to Stay Safe in the World Today," noted that to avoid accidents one should refrain from walking on streets or sidewalks because 14 % of all

accidents occur to pedestrians. One should avoid driving in a car since 20 % of all traffic accidents are fatal. One should also not travel by air, train or bus since 16 % of all accidents involve these forms of transportation. Of the remaining 33 % of fatalities per year, 32 % of all deaths occur in hospitals.

However, research shows that only .01% of all deaths occur in a synagogue, and these are usually related to previous physical disorders -- leading to the conclusion that the safest place to be at any given point in time is clearly the synagogue. So for safety's sake, one should try to be in synagogue as much as possible!

©Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt  
Congregation B'nai Tzedek  
Potomac, Maryland  
September 20, 2009  
[potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:potomacrebbe@bnaitzedek.org)

*If this sermon was forwarded to you and you would like to be added to Rabbi Weinblatt's sermon list, please contact Barbara Perlmutter at [bperlmutter@bnaitzedek.org](mailto:bperlmutter@bnaitzedek.org) / 301 299-0225 x305.*