

An Invitation to Prayer
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5771 – Rabbi Toba Spitzer

There are many things that I love about Rosh Hashanah and about the High Holydays in general. I love that our Jewish new year begins just as the season is beginning to change, as summer gives way to fall; the crispness in the air is Nature's signal to me to wake up, to think about where I am in my life and where I want to be going. I love that as Jews we are given these intensive ten days, these Yamim Noraim, to reflect, alone and together, to focus our minds and our hearts on the hard work of *teshuvah*.

And I love that as a congregation we begin the year at the peak – no build up, just bam! We're all here, I get to see everyone, to reconnect. And yet this also remains one of the most mysterious aspects of these holidays to me. I know that sitting in synagogue is not the preferred activity of most people who I see here – otherwise we'd need to hold our services at Gann Academy every Shabbat, not just once a year! I am amazed every year that folks show up to run the equivalent of a liturgical marathon, making it through the longest services of the year with some of the most difficult theological imagery – without having done any training, no building up over the year to make it up and over the Heartbreak Hill of High Holydays davening.

Whatever the reasons – and I'm sure they're myriad, and to be honest it doesn't matter to me so much why folks show up – I'm happy you're here. What I do care about is that these days, these hours that we spend together, be of use to you. So I wanted to spend a little time tonight talking about what it is we're doing here, at these High Holydays services, and how you might engage in ways that will be most helpful to you. Ideally, these services will not feel like an endurance test, or a good place for a nap. Rather, I'd love it if we could experience our time together – and all of this time from Rosh Hashanah through Yom Kippur—as a gift that we've been given.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi writes that “we find ourselves in exile from our soul in the realm of time,” because we live most of our days in what he calls “commodity time”—time that is measured as money, that is measured by how productive we are. We talk about time in mercantile terms—buying time, wasting it, saving it, maximizing it. Reb Zalman says that we only briefly have glimpses of what he calls “organic time,” time in which we can just be, in harmony with nature and ourselves. Time that is not measured by how much we accomplish or what we produce. And this is precisely what Shabbat each week, and the holidays during the year, are for—to remove us from commodity time and allow us to be with ourselves in an entirely different way. Our hours together at shul during Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur are one aspect of this “organic time,” they are structured opportunities to reflect, renew, recommit, reconnect. Time to just “be.”

There is a wonderful opportunity here, in our time together, if we know how to use it. But there are also some serious obstacles. I know that for many folks here—just as for many Jews around the world in all kinds of synagogues—the whole issue of prayer is a difficult one. What is prayer, exactly, and how do I do it? What if I don't really believe that there's any Divine Being out there listening? What if the words and images in the machzor, the prayerbook, leave me cold? How can I do this with integrity, when I have so many questions, so many doubts?

The first thing I would say is that all of you needs to be here – including your doubts, your frustrations, your beliefs and your disbeliefs. So bring them on in. And while you're at it, bring your suffering and your joy, your uncertainties and your heartbreak, the ways you love yourself and the ways you feel lousy about yourself. We need to have all of ourselves here if we want to move closer to a sense of wholeness.

It also helps if we think of prayer not as an intellectual activity, not as an exercise of the mind. There is really nothing to be proved, or disproved, here. And prayer is not an attempt to “get” somewhere, to achieve some particular spiritual or emotional state. We don't need to look like Julia Roberts meditating in Bali to have a meaningful experience.

I tend to think of prayer as a posture, a willingness to “be” in a certain way. A willingness to be vulnerable. To be open.

To open up is to begin to admit our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, our lacks. We can begin to foster some awareness of things that we need to put right in our lives. We can begin to admit where we're in need. We can also open ourselves to the suffering of others, and we can allow ourselves to yearn for an end to that suffering.

We also open up to joy, to love, to gratitude. Instead of focusing on all the places of lack in our lives, we can foster a sense of gratitude for all that we do have, for each and every moment of being here, being alive.

This is really what the machzor, these hundreds and hundreds of pages, are for: to aid us in this process of opening up to our yearnings, our uncertainties, and our joy. The verses here are poetry, and they are asking to be recited – not in order to convince, but in order to awaken things inside of us. By saying blessings of praise and gratitude in each of the morning services, we can begin to foster a sense of gratitude, can begin to more deeply appreciate all that we have. By speaking words of regret, by pleading for compassion, perhaps we can open up places of vulnerability within our hearts.

But if the High Holydays liturgy is a bit like a drama that we are being asked to enter into, then for many people there's a major problem with the main character, whom many folks either actively dislike or don't really believe exists. I'm talking, of course, about God, who appears in most of the scenes over the course of these holidays. Is it possible to pray if you don't believe in God? Or if you have a vague sense of some greater Power in the universe, but not a Being that listens or responds? What exactly are we praying to, or at, or with?

While these are important questions, I actually don't believe you need to have any particular faith, or any particular answers to these questions, to engage in a meaningful prayer experience. Needing to have all of your God questions answered before entering into prayer assumes that prayer entails certainty, rather than the ability to embrace uncertainty and surprise.

Or, to shift metaphors slightly: needing to be sure about the existence of God before starting to pray is sort of like demanding to know the ending of a book before you start to read it. When I

pick up a new book, I am surrendering in some small way to the author of that book – trusting him or her to lead me somewhere new, to some new insight, to give me some kind of experience. I allow myself to be taken on that journey with no real guarantees. And ultimately, the point isn't the ending of the book—it's the process of getting there, it's those moments along the way when I am completely engulfed within the life of the novel, when a different kind of awareness than I usually have encompasses me.

Things may happen in the book that aren't "real," that don't directly reflect my daily life as I usually know it. But if it's a good book, then any apparent unreality will be in the service of helping me grasp deeper truths about humanity, about life, about myself. And in the end it won't matter if it's Ernest Hemingway or Gabriel Garcia Marquez or Virginia Wolf—it won't matter how "realistic" or "unrealistic" the plot is. In fact, the question, "how real is this?" is an irrelevant question when we think about how meaningful the experience of reading has been. The truth of a book—like the truth of prayer—happens on an entirely different level than what we usually think of as the "real," the actual.

So is prayer an engagement in a fiction? No, but neither is it a science experiment. Prayer is more like a journey whose outcome is in the hands of something beyond myself. It invites a willingness to be open to surprise, to the eventuality that some kind of meeting might occur that I may not have been able to expect—an encounter with some aspect of myself, or of the Universe, that I might not have experienced in quite this way before.

This doesn't have to be a dramatic journey. I have found that people are wired differently this way. Some people's spiritual lives are of the Harry Potter sort, filled with magic and mystery and great drama. Others are more along the lines of Jane Austen novels, an exploration of the realm of the daily and mundane, yet no less beautiful for that. Nothing particularly dramatic has to happen here, during these services, for real prayer to have happened.

So for the doubters, the agnostics and atheists among us, the only thing you need to have a bit of faith in is that you have a spirit, a soul—something within you that connects to others, that is part of something larger than itself, that knows in ways that are not exactly the same as how the mind knows.

And for those among us who are more comfortable with some sense of the divine, who experience some sort of relationship to God, then prayer is an important aspect of nurturing that relationship. Whether or not you believe in a God that "hears" you, try talking to It, to Her or Him, over these Days of Awe. See what happens when you enter into that conversation, when you allow yourself to pour out your heart to Something bigger than yourself.

To the extent that prayer is a journey into the unknown, I invite you over the coming hours and days to explore something that makes you uneasy, that perhaps frightens you in some way. Sometimes the things we are most afraid of are precisely what we need to be looking at. If the notion of encountering God fills you with a deep uneasiness—or perhaps you can't even get near the uneasiness due to the doubt and derision lying in the way—then this would be a great opportunity to see what happens if you pray as if there were in fact some kind of God in here and out there. What would happen if, during the silent portion of the Amidah, you really asked for

something you need? If you really expressed your regret to God? Or your anger, or your disappointment? It might be worth finding out.

Or maybe you don't have a problem with God, but you do have a problem with you. Maybe you're afraid to look too closely at those places where things aren't going right—afraid to see your own role in them, or afraid that getting too close will be unbearable. But prayer is a posture where the great power of love and compassion within ourselves, within the universe, is invited to sit with us. If you can invite that in, that Source of compassion, then know that you don't have to do your exploration alone. Or maybe it's hard for you to believe that you have a right to ask for anything at all—it's your role to give, not to receive, or it's too scary to ask, because then you have to admit that there is something you lack. So go ahead, do it—ask. Not asking selfishly, but asking in order to be of service, to do your work in the world more fully.

Prayer can also be a posture not of asking, but of listening. If I make the attempt to listen deeply to the murmurings of my own soul, what will I hear? If I just quiet my mind, and try not to follow the stories I spin out endlessly – what will arise? Sometimes we need do nothing but try to clear out the clutter from our minds and do nothing at all, just wait and see what comes in to fill the space.

There are many modalities of Jewish prayer, and I encourage you to use all of them. There are words—so many words!—on these pages. Instead of asking, “do I believe this?”, I would recommend approaching the words of the liturgy with the question, “where is this trying to take me? What are the feelings, what is the orientation, that these words are seeking to arouse in me?” If you happen upon a phrase, in Hebrew or in English, that touches you in some way, stay with it, don't feel the need to “keep up.”

And sometimes the liturgy works in somewhat mysterious ways; just the act of saying the words aloud can stir something up within us. To that end, I encourage you not to “read” from the machzor, but to davven it—and davvening means really engaging physically. It means moving your lips, whether you're saying the Hebrew or the English. It means swaying slightly, getting your body into it. In this way you are entering into the play, entering into the conversation, not sitting on the side as a passive observer.

Another important modality is silence. We have so few opportunities to experience silence in our homes, our cars, our workplaces. There is constant input from TV and radio, from our computers and ipods. And when we do find a moment to sit quietly with ourselves, we discover that it's incredibly loud in here. Sometimes the noisiest place is our own heads.

So I invite you to use the times of silence that are scattered throughout the services, to allow your mind to quiet, to let go of the endless planning, worrying, obsessing, that engages so much of our thoughts so much of the time. Enjoy being unplugged over these holidays, while you're at services or when you go home.

And perhaps the most important component of these services, music. Singing is very central to Jewish prayer, it engages the heart and the spirit in a way that is beyond words. It activates parts of our brains in ways that words on a page cannot. So whether or not you think you can sing,

whether or not the words are familiar, I invite you to join in when we sing together. Almost all that we sing communally is transliterated, so that hopefully the Hebrew will not be a barrier; and if the words are too much, then “yai dai dai” will always do. Let the music move you, feel free to get up and really move if you so desire, clap your hands, do whatever it is that makes you happy—but sing. It’s one of the gifts of having so many of us together here over these holidays, that we can make a wonderful, joyful noise together.

I invite you to make this prayer space your own over these holidays. I invite you to try something new, to bring your presence and awareness into this journey. I invite you to pray even if you’re still not sure what that means. After the holydays, I invite you to join me on Thursday mornings for my weekly class, which this year will focus on “Service of the Heart,” an exploration of the liturgy and of what prayer might mean to us today.

Whatever prayers you offer over these holydays, whatever mix of words, music and silence we’re able to conjure together, may this season bring each of us some measure of insight, of healing, of resolve. May all of us be written for a sweet, healthy, and abundant new year.

L’shanah tovah tikkateivu!