

## Rosh Hashanah 2021 – Fearing God & Life as Prayer

Good morning, boker tov, and shanah tovah to each of you. It is a delight to be here with you all this morning, the first morning of my first High Holiday season here at Temple Beth Am. Last night, I spoke about some of the many questions that we should be asking ourselves this time of year. These included questions such as where am I in relationship to the goals I have set for myself? Where am I on the ladder of mitzvot? Have I gone up the ladder or down? Where am I in relationship to Judaism, my soul, to God, and my community? Last night I spoke in general terms about Judaism itself, and the beauty of our tradition. This morning I want to focus on our relationship with God and therefore our souls, our consciences, our behaviors.

There are many ways we could go about addressing this, but this morning I'd like to start with Psalm 69:14, a verse that is part of the holiday the Torah service. We chanted at that time: "*Va'ani tefilati, l'cha Adonai eit ratzon.*" For those of us who aren't 100% fluent in Hebrew, our understanding of this verse hangs on its translation. Our Mahzor Lev Shalem translates it as: "May this be an auspicious time, Adonai for my prayer." That is what it says on the left hand of the mahzor. But our mahzor doesn't simply contain the text of the prayers. It has explanations. Thus, on the right hand side our mahzor gives a literal translation of this verse "And I, I am a prayer to You," and explains: "Our lives may be seen as prayers offered to God."

I have been using *Mahzor Lev Shalem*, our movement's "new" mahzor for a full decade. Each time I read this passage and its explanation I am simultaneously inspired and confused. It is hard enough at times to recite the prayers fluently, to take in their meaning, and feel them in our hearts. If we can barely do that, how do we make our lives into prayers?

I think some vocabulary might help. The Hebrew word *avodah* generally means worship. *L'hitpalel* is a reflexive verb meaning to pray, sometimes understood as to judge oneself, and the word *tefillah* is generally translated as prayer. There are three main types of prayer: praise - *hallel*, request - *bakashah*, and thanks - *hoda'ah*. A subset of *bakashot* are *tahanunim* which are supplications, a more intense form of asking God for something. So now we're all Hebrew geniuses. There's only one problem. Knowing these words still doesn't tell us how to make our lives into prayers. No worries. I promise I'll get there.

Rabbi Elyse Frishman, the editor of the Reform movement's prayer book *Mishkan Tefillah*, once shared her thoughts on prayer, saying: "Jewish prayer is not simply a matter of personal transformation or reflection; it is absolutely meant to move us toward something greater. The siddur is not just to reflect who we are, but who we might become. The siddur affirms a person's role and worth in relationship with community and God. Relationship requires action; the siddur reinforces how we should behave."

I believe that what Rabbi Frishman meant is that as important as it is that we pray in a heartfelt manner today and throughout the rest of the High Holidays, the way we conduct our lives has the potential to be an equal or even greater act of devotion. Most importantly, the siddurim we use daily and each Shabbat, and the mahzor that we use at this time of year, are supposed to be our GUIDES in how to live - not merely how to pray, but how to live our lives AS prayers to God.

I have often told people that the greatest and most easily accessible source of Jewish theology, philosophy, & aspirational living are the siddur & mahzor. It is there that we encounter the Jewish understanding of God, our relationship with other people, nature, even philosophical ideas such as truth, wisdom, goodness, peace, and more. It can all be found in our prayer book.

With the concept of the prayer book as a guide for our lives, let's step back and think about the words in the siddur and mahzor. Even accounting for the weekday Amidah and the penitential prayers on the High Holidays it is easy to discern that our prayers are filled with words of praise and thanks. It may not seem obvious, but praising God and thanking God are supposed to change the way we behave!

So for example during the *birkhot ha-shahar*, morning blessings, when I praise God for creating this magnificent world and universe, it causes me to contemplate my role as a steward of our beautiful planet and its living creatures. When I thank God for making me in God's image, I am reminded that ALL human beings are equally in God's image and are my brothers and sisters - even when I don't like them, agree with, or think like them. When I praise and thank God for making me a free person, I develop compassion for those who are not free. This can lead me to develop a sense of political activism in which I work towards making a world where everyone is literally free, not a slave like the Uighurs in China or living in a totalitarian state like North Korea or the new Afghanistan. Or it can lead to a personal sensitivity to those who are slaves to an addiction, to traumas from their pasts, or more. When I say thank you for the ability to see, I am supposed to become sympathetic to those who are blind as well as those who cannot afford glasses, contacts or sight-saving surgeries. When I thank God for the clothes on my back and for giving me everything I need to survive, I remember the homeless and all those struggling to survive these economically difficult times.

When I thank God for guiding my path, I feel sympathy for those who feel lost. When I recite the words of Oseh Shalom, praising God for making peace in the heavens and asking for peace in the world, that isn't just a nice and comforting melody. It is a true wish that I know we must each do our best to make come true through OUR actions. And when I say the prayer for the country and government in which I pray that our leaders act with wisdom and justice so that peace and freedom can prevail, I mean it with all my heart, and I commit to doing all I can to ensure that we have the best government and leaders possible. These wishes, these feelings, engendered by the prayers are not supposed to be mere empty words. They are supposed to be heartfelt and they are supposed to ensure that I operate in the world with a sense of gratitude every day, simultaneous with a recognition of the imperfections in the world and a vision of a better tomorrow. Finally, the prayers urge me to translate that gratitude into action. When we say the words *l'taken olam b'malchut shaddai* in the Aleynu each day, we are supposed to commit to helping repair the world and make it into a place that reflects the sovereignty of God. And the way we do all of it is through our commitment to tradition and mitzvot.

A few minutes ago I listed among the many things we thank God for each day is making us in God's image. Recently, I came across a passage from Natan Sharansky's book *Defending Identity: Its Indispensable Role in Protecting Democracy* (pp. 24-25). In it, he speaks about what it means to be in God's image. I'd like to share it with you now. He writes:

“A few days before my arrest, an American tourist gave me a small book of Psalms from my wife, along with a letter she had written. In it Avital explained that she had carried the Psalms with her all year, during her travels around the world to fight for my freedom and for the freedom of Soviet Jewry. Now, she wrote, I feel that you should have it so I am sending it to you. Back then, my Hebrew was in no way adequate to read that book. After I was arrested, the book, along with all my other belongings, was confiscated. Then I began to think about the Psalms and about the note from Avital. The book soon took on an almost mythical meaning for me. I started to fight to have it returned, a battle that continued for three years. I finally received the book along with the news that my father had passed away. I tried to read it, but I still understood little. I had to work my way through it slowly, page by page, comparing different lines, trying to recognize patterns and connect words to each other. The first lines I understood were those of Psalm 23: “Although I walk through the valley of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.” I noticed that in the Psalms, the word fear kept appearing. On the one hand, fear was something to be overcome, such as not fearing evil. But as *yirat hashem* (Adonai), or the fear of God, it had a positive connotation. It took me time to understand what this fear of God meant. My understanding was at first very vague and uncertain. But at some moment it occurred to me, seeing it many times, that this fear was connected not simply to God the Creator but to the image of God in which man was created. Mankind was created to be worthy of that image and to be true to it. This required me to go forward in an honest and direct way, without compromising principles. This fear, the fear of not being worthy of the divine image, not the fear of death, was what I was most afraid of in my interrogations with the KGB. I was afraid to lose the world of inner freedom I had found, to fail to stay true to my inner self, to no longer conduct myself in a way that was worthy of the divine image.

I believe that in many ways, Minister of the Knesset Sharansky was describing living his life as a prayer to God, in which he went forward each day unafraid, grateful to be alive, and translating that gratitude into commitment to his principles. It is a way of being we can all aspire to. As we continue this morning and throughout the holiday season, I pray that we all take MK Sharansky’s story to heart, that we take the words of the mahzor to heart, and that we do as our mahzor urges us – to actually BE in our lives, the prayers we offer God.