

Yom Kippur Eve / Kol Nidrey 2012 5773

One Way to Pray

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Good evening and *gut yontif*.

Tonight I share with you a story. On this evening, on this day, when we share so many prayers and words, sometimes we can find inspiration from a basic story. Each of us has a story about this year. The film strip can play back in your mind. As we walk through Yom Kippur together, let us see where the story brings us.

What does it mean to pray? What does it mean to find inspiration from others? How do we learn from our mistakes and assumptions? What does it mean to really pray, like we want to on a day like Yom Kippur? So many religions have different prayers and in different languages. And there are so many words.

Sometimes when I enter a house of worship, I feel like I am not dressed fancy enough, or I don't have enough money to join in, or I don't know enough about the traditions and customs.

About 300 years ago there lived a rabbi who traveled the countryside in Eastern Europe, people called him the Baal Shem Tov, the master of a good name. He was so loved by the people, especially, the poor.

One of his most enduring messages was, that no matter how rich, knowledgeable or famous you were, the most powerful prayer is the simple one, it was the simplest prayer, the one that comes straight from the heart.

Here is a one of his stories that comes right from the heart. It takes place on Yom Kippur.

A long, long time ago, in a land far away, there was a village that was in the farmlands. This village had a synagogue and it was Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. All of the people of the village were in the shul. There the people would remain all of the day.

All of the people would be there.

Everyone would be there except for one person, Yossel, the orphan boy who slept in the Meir's dairy barn.

He rose at dawn as usual. He waited were he know that the family would soon be out to go to the synagogue on that Yom Kippur morning. Out they came from their great home, dressed in their Yom Kippur attire, all in white. Yossel tugged

on the sleeve of Mr. Meir. From his great height, he looked down at Yossel.

“Please, can I go to the shul today to pray just like everyone else?”

“No,” he replied. His voice was not unkind, but very firm. “The cows must be taken to the field today. The cows do not know it is Yom Kippur. You must do your job as you do any other time.”

One of the children looked at Yossel and said, “Besides, how can you understand the prayerbook? You can’t read! How can you pray?” You know how cruel children can be sometimes, especially at moments such as these.

Yossel watched until they left and then went to the barn. He softly called the cows to him, and as they came to his call, he picked up a small flute that he had made on his own while taking care of the cows. He led the cows to pasture. He did not stop to get any bread from the baker as he normally did, for Yossel knew it was Yom Kippur and one should try not to eat.

The Meir’s sat in the seats of honor, in the seats nearest their beloved rabbi, who was known near and far for his acts of loving kindness and charity. Some of the rabbi’s followers thought he could speak directly to God, as had Miriam and Moses long ago.

Mr. Meir followed the traditions, forming the words of the prayers with his lips, according to tradition, he gently beating his chest along with everyone else in the room when they confessed their sins.

But his mind was not on the prayers or on Yom Kippur, or the gestures he was making.

“If can buy a dozen bushels of grain in Lublin next week,” he was thinking as he said the prayers, “then I can store them in my barn until the deep winter comes in and then I can sell them at a great profit. I wonder,” his mind said, as his fist struck his chest, “I wonder how much the farmers at the Lublin market would be willing to pay this year?”

Mr. Meir’s eldest son also mouthed the prayers and he also beat his chest with his fist, and he also was not thinking about he words of the prayers. He was thinking instead of asking his father for permission to visit Warsaw. “It is so dull in this little town,” he thought to himself. “In Warsaw there are fine shops and restaurants, theater, and interesting men and women. I think,” his mind said as his fist struck his chest, “I think I’ll go to Warsaw whether my father likes it or not.”

All day, they fasted and prayer, they prayed and fasted, the day seemed endless. There were many moments when instead of praying to God to accept their mistakes and forgiveness, instead they prayed for darkness to come so Yom Kippur would end.

At long last, through the windows, they saw the sun beginning to sink low in the west. This meant that Yom Kippur would soon end. Soon the holy rabbi would

begin the final prayers and they could go home and enjoy their herring, black bread, and boiled potatoes. Their mouths watered, already they could taste the black bread spread with freshly made butter. But though the shadows deepened, though darkness drew nearer and nearer, the holy rabbi still did not begin the final prayers, he did not begin the closing service, and he did not ask God to close the gates of heaven and to seal the congregation in the book of life. Instead, he chanted psalm after psalm, prayer after prayer, begging God to hear the words of those gathered in the shul. To hear the words of all those celebrating Yom Kippur everywhere.

Mr. Meir began to get angry. What was the matter with the rabbi? Why hasn't he ended the service? It had gone on long enough he thought. It was dark out, and the sun had long since sunk low in the horizon. There were 3 stars in the sky; it was time to be done with Yom Kippur.

If the rabbi didn't begin the closing service Ne'ilah in 2 minutes, Mr. Meir decided that he and his sons were going to walk out of the shul anyway.

In the pasture, the day had been a long one too. The cows had grazed as usual, but Yossel had eaten nothing. He hadn't even gone down to the river to drink water. He sat in the sunshine thinking.

The evening drew near. The sun sank low in the west and the shadows began to lengthen. He picked up his reed flute.

“Oh God,” he cried, “I don’t know any prayers. But I do know how to play this flute. I don’t have any words, but I give you this tune instead.”

On his flute, Yossel began playing a melody he made up himself. As he played it he looked at the deep grass around him, at the blue sky above him, at the cows grazing peacefully before him, and he thought about the peacefulness of God. His mind, his soul, his heart, were all in the music he played for God, as the sun set in the horizon and three stars appeared in the sky.

At that moment, in that very moment, the rabbi began to chant the Ne'ilah prayers, Our creator, our source, “*Avinu Malkenu*,” he cried, his voice filled with joy, “seal us in the book of life. Seal us there for a year of health and prosperity.”

And with that, he picked up the shofar , the ram’s horn that was next to him, and he blew a loud clear *tekiyah gedolah* blast that filled the entire sanctuary with a deep primal sound. One that echoed in everyone’s soul.

"Ahhh, thank goodness", thought Mr. Meir. “About time,” thought his sons. But to each other and to everyone in the congregation, they shook hands and said, “Lashanah tovah. A good year.”

Mr. Meir went forward to greet the rabbi. A crowd had gathered around him, and they parted when they saw Mr. Meir approach the rabbi. "Lashanah tovah rabbi," said Mr. Meir. "Shanah tovah Mr. Meir," said the rabbi.

"I have a question," said Mr. Meir. He was the only one who would dare ask it, although the very same question was in the mind of everyone else in the shul.

"Why did you wait so long to begin Ne'ilah? Why did you wait so long to bring Yom Kippur to an end?"

The rabbi looked right into Mr. Meir's eyes. "I had a vision," he said. "In my vision, I saw that the gates of heaven were closed. Our prayers were not being accepted, God had closed the door, and our prayers were not entering."

"Why?" asked Mr. Meir.

"I'm not sure," said the rabbi. "I think because they didn't come from the heart. How could I end Yom Kippur when I felt that God wouldn't grant us forgiveness or mercy because God didn't hear our prayers."

"But then you did," Mr. Meir said.

The rabbi nodded. "I had another vision," He said, "I heard a melody. A simple melody played on a reed flute. I saw the gates of heaven open up and I saw the gates of heaven open up and our prayers enter in. It was because of that melody that the gates opened up."

“But why,” asked Mr. Meir again. “Why just a tune on a reed pipe and not all the Hebrew words we were saying?”

“Because,” said the rabbi, “whoever sent that prayer to God sent it with her whole heart. It was a true prayer.”

Head down, eyes thoughtful, Mr. Meir left the shul with his whole family around him.

One the way home, he met up with Yossel on his way back from the pastures.

Mr. Meir saw that little reed flute in Yossel’s hand.

“Lashanah tovah Yossel,” said Mr. Meir. “Lashanah tovah, Mr. Meir,” said Yossel. He could hardly believe that Mr. Meir, the great man was wishing him a good year.

“Will you come into my house?” Mr. Meir asked Yossel. “Will you break the fast with me and my family?”

“Father,” exclaimed his eldest son, “How can you let him in here, all ragged and dirty. How can you let him in our house?”

“Very easily,” said Mr. Meir, “Through the front door.”

Mr. Meir put his arm around Yossel and together they walked through the moonlit streets of the town on their way home. All of the family and all of the cows following behind.

Tomorrow morning we will hear the traditional reading of the Haftarah for Yom Kippur. Although in our Reconstructionist congregation we do not always read the traditional texts, tomorrow morning we will be. The Haftarah is from Isaiah and it asks a question from the start. What kind of a fast is this?

What is the sincerity of our fasting and physical actions today if they don't lead us to a greater good? Although many offer the wish for an easy fast on Yom Kippur, it is my tradition to offer wishes for a meaningful fast. I believe that we do this to awaken ourselves to the blessings around us all the time. May it be a day of deep spirit for you and may you find a way today to connect with the creative force that makes life possible. There are so many ways to fast- to refrain from taking in. Traditionally on this day, it is food and drink that we abstain from, but it is also a day to fast from the modern devices of life such as our computers, phones, pads, laptops, and televisions. It is a time when we are challenged to reflect on what we have that is most important— our lives.

In Hebrew the phrase “Have a meaningful fast” can be translated as *Tzom Mashma'uti*.

And so on this day, I hope that your prayers are true from the heart, that your fast, whatever it may entail, brings you're a deeper feeling of life, and that **you are able to hear the flute music over the din of life.**

As the prayer *Ya'aleh* says, "May we find blessing tonight, tomorrow, and tomorrow evening to help us on the journey higher and higher. *Ya'aleh*, higher and higher may our spirits rise and blessings before us.

Tzom Mashmanti, Gut yontif and good evening.