

## Drash for Kol Nidrei

Rabbi Laurie Green – Delivered September 13, 2013

Kol Nidrei always stirs my soul.

There is something powerful about the melody and the moment.

No wonder so many of us are gathered here tonight.

Before we pray, I think we ought to know what prayer is,

or at least what we want it to be.

So I am going to tell you a story.

Your story might be quite similar to mine, or quite different.

Wherever you are on your life's journey, I offer you this tale in the hope you might find some aspect that can help you on your spiritual path.

This is my story...

There were 40 rabbis in the room. It was one of those rabbis-only professional development opportunities. The topic was *tefilla*, Jewish prayer. The presenter asked a very simple question:

“What is the goal of your *tefilla*?”

You could have heard a pin drop.

Yes, eventually we all came up with answers, but only after the initial shock wore off.

One by one, we realized that we'd never been asked that question before.

No wonder Jews have a spiritual crisis.

Many of us as rabbis share this struggle.

Yes, there are notable exceptions - rabbis, cantors, lay people of incredible spiritual depth – but if we're honest with ourselves, most of us either don't seek a prayer-life at all, or have no idea how to find it, at least not within the organized Jewish community.

That moment changed everything about how I think about prayer. Until that moment, I thought the solution was to do a better job teaching people “about prayer.” So I taught lots of classes on Hebrew, liturgy, theology, and the history of the prayers. I thought that if only we understood where *Barechu* came from, we’d give it more meaning. I was wrong. I looked around the room at my Conservative, Reconstructionist, and Reform colleagues, and I realized that we collectively knew everything there was to know about how to *davenn*, the art of traditional Jewish prayer. We all had a *tefilla* practice.

Our problem is not a failure to teach “about prayer.” It’s a failure to teach people “how to pray.” We’ve sent the message that prayer is reading the words in the book, learning the tunes, and knowing when to stand and sit. But all the Hebrew, history, and theology in the world won’t teach us how to pray, and without a “goal” for our *tefilla*, how do we even know if it’s working?

How did we get here? Jews didn’t always relate to prayer as a chore to be rushed through so we could get to work or the *oneg*.

The Talmud (Mishnah Berachot 4:4) tells us “if your *Amidah* is *keva* it can hardly be *tachanunim*” which means “if the way you pray the major piece of the liturgy is all about the fixed rules, you can hardly be relating to God in a personal, intimate and meaningful way.”

Any study of *Masekhet Berachot*, the rabbinic rules of prayer, will make clear that the words weren’t fixed. There were themes and blessings that were mandated, but there were no set texts, and much varied by the individual and the community. And there were far fewer prayers, so there was no need to rush through it to get it all done.

Whenever there was a question as to what the proper practice should be the answer was *minhag hamakom*, whatever was the custom of that place ruled the day, so Jewish communities all over the world created beautiful, flexible, and radically different practices.

It wasn’t until the late Middle Ages when three factors changed everything.

First, Maimonides, and other Jewish legal authorities, such as the Rosh and the Tur wrote their great codes of Jewish law. In writing down the rules, they told people that there was a proper way.

Second, as the exile from Spain and other political and economic factors moved Jews all over, Jews from Spain, Italy, Morocco, and Egypt had to figure out how to pray together and the old local customs were molded into a single custom.

The final cause was the invention of the printing press. As soon as there’s a book there’s a right way to pray.

It can't be a coincidence that the *Shulchan Aruch*, the last great code of Jewish law, was written just before the invention of the printing press. It didn't take long for the *Shulchan Aruch* to travel in print around the world.

This created the modern obsession with what liturgy scholar Rabbi Lawrence Hoffman calls "doing it right." Hoffman even published an article entitled "Doing It Right Or Doing It Well?" in which he argues that Reform Jews, just as much as the Orthodox, have become so concerned with "doing it right" that none of them are doing it well.

But back to my story.

I didn't grow up praying. I sat in Hebrew school sounding out Hebrew letters and memorizing for my Bat Mitzvah, but prayer. What was that?

I started davenning seriously in college as I explored every denomination imaginable, and a few non-Jewish traditions too.

Personally, I had a pretty good prayer-life, before I became a rabbi.

Then the day-to-day struggles of congregational life beat it out of me.

But it wasn't their fault. It was mine.

And so two and a ½ years ago, I vowed to get my spiritual life in order. Hence my attendance at this rabbinic retreat about prayer last year. It was only one of many pieces of a rabbinic spirituality fellowship I had signed up for. Meditation, yoga, faculty mentors, and studying a variety of spiritual texts, from *hasidut* to *mussar*, the whole nine-yards for an eighteen month crash course.

Fast forward two nights, same retreat, almost 10pm. I was walking to a friend's cabin, through what should have been a physically and emotionally safe place. And then half-way there, my breathing got fast and shallow, my heart started racing, and my eyes began darting about the darkness looking for danger in the bushes.

I knew exactly what was happening, and I was powerless to do anything about it.

My brain had time-warped fifteen years to a different walk between cabins, in the dark, at a different camp that should have been a physically and emotionally safe place.

I'll spare you the details. Suffice it to say I was a teenager and on-staff at a Jewish summer camp. He was, and still is, a rabbi who is older than my father. For all our sakes, I won't share any details, but you get the idea.

Lucky for me, this time, fifteen years later, I was walking to the right cabin. My friend is a hospital chaplain who took one look at my face and wisely positioned himself in a chair on the opposite side of the room. Unconvinced by my mumbling, "I'm fine. I dealt with this year's ago. It always passes," he made me promise to call a therapist. I agreed to, but I didn't.

As luck would have it, the program we were attending paired us up as study partners. So every few weeks he'd ask "made that call yet?" and I'd say "I will, really, soon."

I don't know why the universe picked last year to have me address this trauma, but so it was.

And as it happened, last Rosh HaShanah the Buffalo News carried a story about the Buffalo Jewish community's notorious abusive rabbi. Not the same guy, but since it was my job to protect the Buffalo Jewish community, my Jewish community, I sat in countless rabbis' meetings trying to ignore my own trauma. Friends told me to skip the meetings and take care of myself, but I felt responsible for making sure the situation was handled properly. After all, I was a rabbi. And frankly, I wanted to prove to myself that I could handle it. After all, I was just fine.

When I still didn't accept that I wasn't fine, God tried a more direct line, right to my office.

There was the adolescent student who was a behavioral nightmare until we figured out he had been molested.

And a few weeks later, there was the adult congregant who told me her life story, and it made my story sound like a walk in the park.

Now I've been providing pastoral care long enough that I thought I'd heard it all. Usually these particular stories come once or twice a year, not once every week or two in rapid fire succession.

By November, after a few more such encounters, I was a wreck.

"Stop" (looking up), I cried. "Please make it stop. Send them all to someone else. I can't take any more."

No, I didn't hear a voice, but the response was clear. It said, "Exactly, Laurie. You can't take any more, so help me help you, and pick up the phone."

And so I finally did. I found a great therapist.

January came, and along with it the next rabbinic retreat. Spending five days meditating, davenning, studying the Jewish spiritual masters, and doing yoga made it all bearable, so I decided I wasn't just going to do this fellowship, I was going to dive in. No more meditating and going to yoga twice a week. I was going to pray, meditate and do yoga every day. Where I was going to find the time to do this while being a congregational rabbi, raising a young child, tending to an ill mother, and flying all over the

country on interviews, I had no idea. But feeling anxious and unfocused was definitely a time waster, so it was worth a try.

So I set some goals for myself, and embarked on my new spiritual practice, and I kept seeing my therapist, of course.

I naively expected to feel great. You'd think that much spirituality would make a person feel better, but instead I felt worse. At times I felt overwhelmed by anxiety. And then the sleep deprivation hit. For almost four months, I woke up every 2-4 hours and was unable to fall back asleep for 3-4 hours at a time. So even on my day off, I was falling back asleep at 6am just as my son was waking me up. Months of four hours a night. Not good.

Out of desperation, I set a big Passover "goal" for my spiritual practice - to feel redeemed. The Passover *Amidah* is a special piece of liturgy that's all about redemption. We call Passover *zman cheruteinu*, the season of our freedom, and the prayer contains one of my favorite lines about this being a unique time of God's love and favor. Love, favor, freedom, redemption – a little *zman cheruteinu* was all I was asking for. But I was disappointed. No matter how many times I prayed the *Amidah* I was stuck. The eighth day of *Pesach* came and went and I was still in Egypt.

So I broke a rule. I decided my *Pesach* wasn't over yet. No bread, more davenning. I had a halachic debate with myself. Could I really pray the festival *Amidah* after the festival was over? Was it a sin? Who was I to declare it still *Pesach*? Should I get another rabbinic opinion?

So Wednesday afternoon I stood before the ark and davenned the festival *Amidah*, and lightning didn't strike me.

Later that same day, I was driving and listening to music. I was struck by a beautiful song which quotes Psalm 27, the psalm for Elul, about trusting in God.

I turned off the radio, kept singing, and without knowing it, starting singing new words to the same tune. That night, I wrote the only "song" I've ever written. I had eight verses that came from what I can only call my soul, or my angel, I have no idea? When the muse disappeared, I grabbed a *siddur* for inspiration. When I stopped much later, I realized I had all the themes of a morning service, just out of order. So I reordered the verses and, without intending to, I started singing it three times a day.

On Thursday, I felt awful. I davenned the festival *Amidah* again. It still felt right. That afternoon I had my session with my study partner. I confessed my sin of praying the wrong day's liturgy. He said something I will never forget:

"It makes perfect sense to me," he replied. "The seventh day of *Pesach* is the crossing of the Sea. You're not at the other side yet. The only way out is through. You need God to hold back the waters for a bit longer. Don't rush it."

On Friday, something happened. Is that what redemption feels like? It felt like coming up for air. I could breathe again, almost as if I came out the other end of the Red Sea.

The weeks between Passover, when we leave Egypt, and Shavuot, when we receive the Torah, are about getting from the Red Sea to Sinai and boy did I work it. As I counted those days I could feel myself getting closer. I kept hearing my study partner say "the only way out is through."

Counting, counting...

And then I slept! Three solid nights in a row!! Yes!

Was it over by Shavuot? No.

Is it over today? Mostly, but not completely.

Will it ever be over? I don't know.

I do want to be clear about one important thing. I have no doubt that my excellent therapist played a big part in this. Sometimes, prayer alone can't get the job done, but it certainly doesn't hurt.

I'm still keeping up that daily practice. It changes. Some days I *davenn* my song, some days from a prayerbook. Some days I meditate but no yoga. Some days I do yoga and never meditate.

Some days when I pray I really mean it. Some days I'm only going through the motions.

Some days I dedicate separate time to spiritual practice. Some days it's while I'm driving.

I haven't missed a day yet. No doubt, soon enough I will. After all, we all mess up. That is the point of Yom Kippur.

Perhaps that is also the purpose of spiritual practice – to help us deal with all this messy human stuff called life.

For a millennia Jews have debated the purpose of prayer. Is prayer for us - to make us better people? Or does prayer affect what happens in heaven. What goes up comes down.

I don't know the answer. I only know that, for me, prayer does something. Something in my brain changes. Something in my soul is different.

In sharing this story with you I hope I have illustrated three points.

First, it's called spiritual practice because we must practice every day. Practice, practice, practice.

Second, don't worry about doing it right. There is no right. You have to find what's right for you. We have liturgies and teachers and traditions to guide us, to give us a place to start, to bring us wisdom and encouragement, but you have to find your own path. Let the tradition guide you. Don't let it hold you back.

And finally, the old cliché is true. When the going gets tough, when it all seems unbearable, the only way out is through.

If you're having a terrible Yom Kippur because someone you love isn't here this year, the only way out is through.

If you are having a difficult Yom Kippur because you or someone you love likely won't be here next year, the only way out is through.

If you did something you feel is unforgivable, the only way out is through.

If you are in unbearable pain, and you don't think you'll ever be able to forgive who hurt you, the only way out is through.

And if you had a blessed year, and you come here tonight to give thanks, and to wipe the slate clean, in hopes of a better year ahead, we rejoice with you.

We pray for ourselves and for each other.

We pray for our people and for our world.

We pray because we CANNOT pray.

We pray that we might be able to pray.

Amen.

[soft music]