

Rabbi Noah Arnow
Kol Rinah
Yom Kippur morning 2016/5777

What You Praying For?

What are you praying for? What are you praying for this Yom Kippur?

I know people praying about cancer. For his wife. For her husband. For her father. For her cousin. For himself. For herself.

I know people praying that it be treatable.

I know people praying that it not be too excruciatingly painful.

I know people praying that it doesn't take them too fast.

I know someone praying to be pregnant. Maybe this month.

I know someone praying on whether to remain pregnant.

I know people praying to be better parents to their children, better children to their parents.

I know people praying for their children to find happiness.

I know people praying to meet a partner.

I know praying over leaving a partner.

I know people praying over being a better partner.

I know people praying about the epidemic of gun violence in America.

I know people praying for black lives to matter as much as white lives.

I know people praying for Hillary Clinton to win the presidential election.

I know people praying for Hillary Clinton not to win the presidential election.

I know people praying to find a job.

I know people praying not to lose a job.

I know people praying to be able to do better at the work that is their passion.

I know people praying for the chance to pursue their dreams.

I know people praying for direction and purpose in life.

And I definitely know people praying for the Chicago Cubs to win the World Series.

What are you praying for this year, this Yom Kippur? For each of us, there are probably a few things on our minds, and in our hearts this day. But I know for myself, there is often one, overriding thing on my mind, in my heart, in my prayers, on Yom Kippur. What for you is the singular, deepest thing that you keep coming back to this Yom Kippur? Try to focus your thoughts on one, core thing you're praying for.

If you have something you are praying for this Yom Kippur, raise your hand. Don't worry, I won't ask you to say it aloud to everyone.

Keep your hands in the air and look around for a moment. Ok, you can put them down.

What do we learn from this?

I think there are three things we learn from this. First, so many of us at this moment are praying on big things, from deep inside ourselves. Second, rumors of the demise of prayer are

greatly exaggerated--we still have a real need to pray. Third, that we are praying suggests we feel like we need help, but that we are praying also suggests that we have hope.

I want to unpack each of these a little.

The first thing we learn from us all raising our hands is that so many of us are praying from deep pain, deep need, deep concern. You may have thought you were one of only ones praying on something big for you. And while we are each alone in some sense, in our hearts and thoughts, we are not alone--we are together in praying on things that matter. We are together in taking this day, this opportunity, very seriously.

I don't think it's any accident that one of the essential stories of Yom Kippur features the most literal and proverbial prayer from the kishkes, literally, a prayer from the belly, in this case, from the belly of a big fish. Jonah, after fleeing from God's command to warn the Ninevites, finds himself thrown off a ship and swallowed by a *dag gadol*, a big fish.

Jonah only begins to be able say anything true, real, and deep when he finds himself in the belly of a fish. And even then, it takes him three days and nights to begin to pray. He says, "Out of my distress I called to the Lord" (Jonah 2:3). *Karati mitzara li*. "Out of my distress."

This is the essence of prayer. "Prayer is the tale of an aching and yearning heart," says the Rav, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, the leader of modern Orthodoxy in the 20th century. He continues, "If the mind is not haunted by anxiety, not plagued by *tzarah*, narrowness and constriction, if neither fear nor forlornness assault the mind, then prayer is a futile gesture."¹

What Jonah misses is that real prayer does not need to come only from dire physical circumstances. Rather, it's the emotional state of our hearts that also leads to this kind of prayer. Pouring out our hearts like water, to paraphrase a verse from Lamentations, comes when our hearts are full and hurting, when we are overcome and overwhelmed.

I don't know about you, but a part of me is overcome and overwhelmed pretty often. The scope of our responsibilities, the need in the world for so much more than we have to offer, our exhaustion at just managing is overwhelming. And if we're not overwhelmed, we're probably not sensing our responsibility, and ability, in the world strongly enough.

But only infrequently do we let it out and show--to anyone else or even to ourselves--that feeling of being overwhelmed, by our own lives and by the whole enormous world.

And that's the beauty of Yom Kippur, and of shul, and of being together in all this. This is the day each of us individually and our entire congregation comes together and and cries out, in one voice, out of our distress. This is the day we cry out, out loud, to ourselves, to each other, and to God. It can also be a model that it does not need to just happen once a year.

Second, all of your raised hands tell me that rumors of the demise of prayer are greatly exaggerated. Prayer is alive, and well, and as necessary as ever.

And I want to specify that I mean petitionary prayer--prayers that petition--that ask for--are still alive and well. The words "prayer" and "worship" are often used interchangeably, but if we think about it, they are really not synonymous. Worship means praise and perhaps gratitude. Prayer, however, includes praise and gratitude, but also encompasses requests or petitions, *bakashot* in Hebrew.

¹ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart* (New York: Toras HoRav Foundation, 2003), "Prayer Petition and Crisis," pp. 20, 29.

The core text of Jewish prayer--the weekday Amida, the weekday standing prayer that we recite three times each day, morning, afternoon and evening, has the shorthand structure of starting with "wow," moving to "please," and concluding with "thank you." "Wow," "please," and "thank you" I know rattles of the lips of our Jewish educators.

The first three of the nineteen blessings of the weekday Amida are called *shevach*--praise, or "wow." Then there are thirteen *bakashot*--petitions, requests, asks--that's "please." Then, we conclude with three blessings of *hoda'ah*--gratitude or "thank you." Three for "wow," thirteen for "please," and three for "thank you." That middle section, "please," with thirteen blessings, is the biggest, the longest, by far.

And yet. In this age of rationalism and skepticism, science and secularism, we often think, or think that others think, that prayer is pointless. We sometimes especially "consider petitionary prayer an unworthy part of the service, a remnant of magical religion when the savage bartered with his gods and tried to reach a *quid quo pro* with them"² in the words of Rav Soloveitchik. Moreover, the explanatory power of science to explain so much of our world has undermined petitionary prayer. A part of me, my intellectual side, knows that my prayers will not fix what ails me, or my loved ones, our troubled country or our ailing world. But neither can I stop myself from praying for things. And even if I wanted to, the words of the siddur would not let me refrain from petitions. Even the most rational of us are liable to write a note and stuff it into the cracks between the stones of the Kotel.

I've written those notes. And if you have too, you'll understand this. The act of writing down the needs, the prayers, the requests, that are deepest in my heart and most urgent to my life is an experience of knowing myself, of being in touch with myself, of being honest and real with myself.

And there's a turn, in expressing verbally, and even more so in writing, a yearning, a need, a prayer. It's a turn to something beyond us because in the moment of expressing that need, of praying and yearning, and crying out from the narrow places, we are feeling that we need help, that it is beyond our ability to meet our need and answer our own cries. We are pouring out our hearts like water (Lamentations 2:19), and some part of us instinctively knows or intuits the next part of that verse from Lamentations--"*shifchi kamayim libech*, pour out your heart like water, *nochach pnei hashem*--before the presence of God.

The truest description of God I know is that God is the name we give to the one to whom we pray, the one we address and beseech when we call from the depths, from the kishkes, from the belly.

And this is where we come to the third element of our learning. That we have real petitionary prayers of request in our hearts today tells me that we feel like we need help, that we can't do what needs to be done, or can't do without some help beyond ourselves. It's an expression of vulnerability, of surrender. We recognize that our power, our strength, our reach, our knowledge, is limited.

But prayer is not giving up. We don't pray for the completely impossible. I'm not praying for the Mets to win the World Series this year. We're also warned in the Talmud against praying for things that have happened that we just don't know yet. For example, we're not supposed pray for a baby in utero to be a boy or a girl, because its sex is already

² Soloveitchik, p. 28-29.

determined. If you turn into your neighborhood, and see a house on fire, we don't pray for it not to be our house, because it already either is or it isn't.

We pray not for the already-determined, and not for the impossible, but rather for the possible, for the possibilities. And that we are praying says that we still have hope. Our prayers are an expression of our deepest hopes, for our world, for our loved ones, for our lives, for ourselves.

In a few moments, we will begin Yizkor, when we remember those who are no longer with us.

We remember the story, the narrative, of their lives.

We remember the stories that were the texture of their lives.

We remember their faces.

We remember the sound of their voices.

We remember how they felt when we hugged them.

We remember how they made us feel when we were with them.

Can we also remember their prayers--the prayers that were deepest for them? What were they, or what might they have been?

Sometimes, our prayers are for the world after we leave it. What might our loved ones' last prayers for us and our world have been?

What might we do to answer their prayers?

How might we be the answer to their prayers?

We now begin Yizkor.