

The Problem with Prayer  
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When I was new at Temple Sinai, I recall a particular Friday night service – it only happened once. Cantor Micah was out on maternity leave and maybe the service had run long or maybe I thought it would be the right decision but I decided to skip over Debbie Friedman’s Mi Shebeirach Refuah Shleimah. This is a prayer that many of you know by heart; asking God to bless those in need of healing with a renewal of body and a renewal of spirit. It is a sweet message but it did not occur to me to be a significant omission. Frankly, I have never experienced it to be the most powerful of prayers. It is, after all, a non-liturgical, song, written by a children’s music composer in 1989 – the same year that Tone Lōc wrote “The Funky Cold Medina.” We’re not talking about music from Sinai, here folks.

After that service, there was a crowd of you waiting to share your displeasure with me. It seems that I was alone in seeing the choice of omission as insignificant. The Cantor and I make liturgical choices every Shabbat and no one says a thing but I skip one little song written the same year that Cher came out with “If I could turn back time,” and you people nearly ran me out of town! Obviously, I had, inadvertently, touched a nerve; It has given me a lot of pause ever since. What is it about the Mi Shebeirach that becomes so important to people?

My teacher, Rabbi Jonathan Slater, offered one answer. He suggested that it is the only portion of today’s service in which most people feel truly engaged to pray for what is important to *them*. At that moment, the service leader encourages you to look deeply into your heart and to identify those you know who are in need of healing. I am reminded of a quote from Harold Kushner who wrote, “If prayer worked the way most people think it does, no one would ever die, because no prayer is offered more sincerely

than a prayer for life, for health and recovery from illness.”<sup>1</sup> This is a prayer that we can, apparently, put our heart into!

The unspoken continuation of Rabbi Slater’s point is that, if the Mi Shebeirach is the *most* meaningful moment of the service for most congregants, then the rest of the service is, to some degree, *less* meaningful to the average Jew. I know that I am making broad generalizations and, if you have had powerful spiritual experiences every single time you’ve ever prayed, then I am not speaking to you. If, however, you’ve ever found it difficult to connect to the liturgy or the environment or the words of the rabbi then you and I have something in common. Praying is really hard and, if it was ever second nature to human beings, many of us have lost our instinctual comfort with it.

As I look around the room this evening, I am able to imagine some of the most common experiences out there. These are not random guesses but rather what I’ve come to learn after speaking with many individuals about their relationship to prayer in synagogue. Listen...and see if any of these types describe you:

- ✧ There are some of you here for whom praying feels very natural and speaking to God is like speaking to a dear a friend – without any awkwardness.
- ✧ Others of you are trying your best to communicate with God and are uncertain if you’re doing it right but you assume that God will overlook your errors and know the sincerity of your heart.
- ✧ I’m pretty sure that there are a couple of you who cannot explain why you’re here – in the rest of your lives, you’re usually so rational - Maybe this is just how you connect with your Jewish community and Jewish Identity.
- ✧ I know that there are some of you who are simply comfortable here. You know you don’t really know how to pray and you are, quite honestly, fine with that.

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<sup>1</sup> Kushner, Harold. As quoted in: Itinerary for Change – Synagogue 3000.  
<http://www.synagogue3000.org/files/FamilyLimud.pdf> ,p.66

- ☆ And, I think there is probably even one or two of you here with a loved one who expects you to be next to him/her and you're just sitting patiently...and I'll bet you wish you had not just looked at your watch, again.

Through all these differences, what is it that binds us all in the room? What do we all feel in common? What I think all of us, in this room, can agree upon is that we share a sense of yearning. Either our soul, or our mind or the messages from our community tell us that there is something of significance that is supposed to happen in a house of worship and we pursue it. Maybe you don't know what you're yearning for or maybe you remember it from your distant past and you yearn for it again. Perhaps you're having a powerful experience but are yearning for something more. We're all wishing something of meaning would happen when we walk through these doors (even if we're too rational to admit it!).

And yet, with the yearning, there is hesitation. I am amazed how reluctant we all are to ask God for what we need. What is it that prevents open communication with God?

- ☆ Some have shared with me that they are reluctant to reduce God to their errand boy. It is presumptuous to believe that God is simply waiting for us to announce our desires so that our wish will be God's command. Rabbi David Wolpe reassures us, "If you saw somebody pulling a boat to the shore and were mistaken about mechanics and motion, you might think that he was pulling the shore to the boat. And," he says, "that is what prayer is like. You think that you're pulling God to you, but in fact, if you pray well, you pull yourself to God."<sup>2</sup>
- ☆ Some of us have made bargains with God in the past, "If you do this thing I ask, I will never ask for anything ever again." I respect the effort with which you are trying to keep your promise but they also sound like the words of a child, "if you get me the puppy, I'll never ask for anything ever again." First, it is unrealistic and

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<sup>2</sup> Wolpe, Rabbi David. Quoted in Making Prayer Real. Comins, Mike, Jewish Lights: Woodstock, VT. 2010. p.41.

unhealthy and second, it is not what the parents really want anyway – they *like* feeling needed by their child and they appreciate the “ask” even if they cannot provide. If you believe in such a God, our tradition teaches that God likes being asked – even if your wish isn’t going to be God’s command.

- ✧ And perhaps, some of you struggle because you cannot get behind the meaning of the liturgy. If we don’t believe the words of the prayer book then there is no reason we can see to offer them to God. We, rabbis, work to provide wide-ranging interpretations for liturgy whose meaning leaves many of you shifting uncomfortably in your seats.
- ✧ And, of course, there are those who do not believe in God and who feel a measure of something (condescension, perhaps even quiet envy) about those who do – it’d be nice, wouldn’t it?

Which one are you?

What we are really yearning for, with our attendance, is for this evening to “mean” something. If you do not feel that you’re achieving this goal, it might be because you are still spending too much time in your head. Your theology – that is, what you know about God and the Universe – does not fit with what is being talking about. I smile as I share a teaching from Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shlomi who said, “I don’t let my theology get in the way of my spiritual life.”<sup>3</sup> Reb Zalman, of blessed memory, understood that we spend a lot of time in our head and he is encouraging us to spend some important time in our heart. How many of us have, at some time felt the truth of the statement, “I’m not religious, I’m spiritual?” Tonight, we’re talking about closing the distance between our spirituality and whatever rationality we usually employ in our daily lives – the trick, of course, is to accomplish this while feeling no sense of hypocrisy.

What, then, are we meant to do with the opportunity this evening’s service provides? It might be helpful to return to Rabbi Kushner. He goes on to remind us that, “People who pray for miracles usually don’t get miracles, any more than children who

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<sup>3</sup> Comins, Rabbi Mike. Making Prayer Real. Jewish Lights Publishing: Woodstock, VT. 2010. p.50

pray for bicycles...get them as a result of praying. But people who pray for courage, for strength to bear the unbearable, for the grace to remember what they have left instead of what they have lost, very often find their prayers answered.”

We know what “hope” looks like and we know what “religion” looks like and we know what “rationality” looks like. But most of us, most of the time, set up intellectual boundaries that prevent us from fluidly crossing the gap between them.

On Fridays and Shabbat mornings at Temple Sinai, there are groups of inquisitive, critical and open-minded people who come to discuss difficult material. The Bible presents them with sometimes misogynistic, out-dated practices demanding fealty to a God that none of us believe in any longer. Yet, they come, knowing that there is something special in the experience of the text all the same. There are some in attendance who are traditional literalists in their relationship to God’s role in the text and others who are atheists and everything in between.

Modernity has created two distinct camps: the Religionists and the Secularists and has asked us to choose our place in just one of those communities. It would appear as though one must set aside all science and rationality if they would spend time in the company of religionists and that they must deny all mystery if they prefer the camp of the secularists. This is a false dichotomy and one I’d urge you to stave off. Einstein, Newton, Schroedinger, Heisenberg, Tesla – all well-known scientists who found no need to deny their sense of wonder and the embrace of the mystery for the sake of their science.

Imagine that you haven’t made up your mind about the content and meaning of the service. Imagine you haven’t gone through this experience so many times that there’s nothing new to impress you or to impact you. Read the liturgy this year, as if for the first time, and start from the assumption that its material is written with you, personally, in mind. Notice the changes that Cantor Micah and I have made to the series of services and settle into the discomfort of an absence or an addition – there are going to be plenty of examples of each.

What I find most beautiful about those Torah study experiences is that, as a collective, we merge the opinions of those who are more rational with those who are more traditional or spiritual and what emerges is something absolutely perfect. And, on a much larger scale, that is what I am suggesting we endeavor to create this holiday season at Sinai...The variations of the individual create a Sacred Community. You know which of the two categories you most identify with. And, you've got assumptions about the beliefs of those in the other camp. I'd like you to imagine a synthesis of all the positions. Imagine that we are offering up our Truth, just by being here and contributing to the collective message and that what is created is, by definition, perfect. In that way, you must begin to see your attendance and your contribution as absolutely essential. Without you and your thoughts - these holidays, this entire undertaking would remain imperfect.

Let me turn my attention for these last few moments to another issue that exists as it relates to the challenge of creating community. In many congregations it has been the culture to give privilege to the liturgy and those who want it untouched. To those who struggle with the text we provide strategies for dealing with their discomfort or we ask them to simply sit through liturgy that they find problematic. And, if we're being honest, that is not a particularly equalitarian way of expressing our holiness as a family for the variant opinions of its family members. Instead, we should be asking for compromise on both sides of the aisle.

So, tomorrow morning, Cantor Micah and I have decided to omit one of the most difficult pieces of liturgy in our canon. Unetaneh Tokef, is the one that says, "God will decide this day, who shall live and who shall die. Who by fire and who by water, who by sword and who by wild beast, etc."<sup>4</sup> Those scheduled to die this coming year are being recorded in the book today. It goes on to tell us that through prayer, we can manipulate the harshness of God's decree. So many of us find this challenging and distracting. So many have identified *that* set of words as their most off-putting moment of the structured religious experience. And, I've always understood your frustration.

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<sup>4</sup> Mishkan Tefillah, Rosh Hashanah volume. CCAR Press. pg. 178

For those of you who would not feel it a proper Holy Day season without these ancient words, the prayer will return to the liturgy next week. But, as one קהילה קדושה – a sacred community – it is incumbent upon us to honor the needs and experiences of the largest possible number of our family members.

This year, much of my attention has been allocated to this question of the balance between tradition and modernity and, as we move through the holidays together, future sermons will seek to address the same challenge in other ways. Let it be possible for us that we open our minds and our hearts – that this prayer service welcomes all and excludes none through its content. May the coming year, 5778, offer us plentiful opportunities to reach new levels of understanding of views not shared and of the perfection achieved when we co-mingle those truths.