

ROSH HASHANAH DAY - 5780

One day, Solomon is out in the woods when he comes across a bear. Frightened for his life, he runs as fast as he can to escape the bear and manages to hide in a cave. But he is horrified to find that the bear has run after him into the cave and now Solomon is trapped. He closes his eyes and begins to recite "Sh'ma Yisrael" in anticipation of his final moments.

When he is finished, he opens his eyes and is surprised to see the bear in front of him with his eyes closed—also praying in Hebrew. Solomon thinks to himself "How lucky am I to be cornered by what must be the only Jewish bear on earth! We're mishpocheh—I'm saved!" And then he listens more carefully to the bear's prayer: "...HAMOTZI LECHEM MIN HA'ARETZ"

It's funny, what people sometimes ask me to pray for. Rabbi, can you pray for good weather? Rabbi, will you pray for my favorite team? Even my father, a staunch atheist, calls me before every plane trip to make sure that I say a prayer for him before take off.

Of course, there are many more meaningful reasons to pray. Just as often I've had people say to me: Pray for my son to get better, pray for me to find a new job. Pray for me to stop being depressed. Pray for there to be peace in this country.

At the heart of every prayerful request -- whether frivolous or profound, silly or sincere -- is the hope that prayer can change our realities. That if we pray hard enough, or use the right words, or have enough people praying for us, our cancer will be cured, we'll win a million dollars, violence will end. In this view, prayer is a magic formula spoken to a Divine Santa Claus that will either grant our wish or not.

And yet, we also know this isn't true. Good people suffer and die, disasters strike and wars rage around the globe. If we believe God answers some prayers and not others, then it implies if someone's prayer isn't answered that they've done something wrong. And that is painful and damaging. If I pray for my child who has cancer and that child dies, does that mean there was something wrong with my prayer, with me, with my child?

When we think of prayer as being something like asking a fairy godmother to grant us wishes, then we run the risk of thinking either God has failed or we have.

So, if prayer doesn't magically fix things, then what does it do? Why bother? Why are we here?

What I've learned is that- prayer may not change the world around us, but it definitely has the potential to change us. I may not pray to God to solve my problems, but I do pray for the strength and wisdom to seek and hopefully find solutions. I don't pray for God to heal a loved one with cancer, but I do pray for them to have courage and hope as they go through their treatments. Even though I don't believe there is a God who acts in the physical world to change it, I still pray, because I believe prayer changes us. Prayer reminds us that we are not alone, that our lives matter. Prayer doesn't change reality; it changes us, so that we can deal with reality.

As Rabbi Isserman eloquently wrote over 50 years ago: "Prayer cannot mend a broken bridge, rebuild a ruined city, or bring water to parched fields. Prayer can mend a broken heart, lift up a discouraged soul, and strengthen a weakened will." Prayer works when we let it change us, when we let it help us connect to something beyond ourselves. Rabbi Amy Eilberg, one of the leaders in the Jewish Healing movement, compiled a list of possible ways in which prayer may work that I'd like to share with you.

Prayer may "work" by invoking a greater sense of God's presence. When we are suffering, it is common to feel alone, even isolated. We fear that no one understands what we're going through, or that they're tired of hearing about our problems. Even if we're not sure we believe in God, prayer can remind us that we are connected to something greater than ourselves, that our life and our problems matter. I recently sat with a woman who had lost her job and was struggling with feelings of fear and inadequacy. I offered a prayer that she find strength and courage to face the challenges ahead, that she know that she is not alone and that no matter her struggles she was good and worthy and beloved.

Prayer may "work" by invoking a place of beauty and transcendence, momentarily pulling the one who is suffering out of their pain. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote: "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of mystery that animates all beings... prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living."

Prayer may "work" by honoring the pain or discomfort in the suffering person's life; in this way, prayer can be deeply grounding and clarifying. We need to know that our suffering is being witnessed and that our longing for healing being honored. We

long to be accompanied in our places of darkness, knowing that our pain and fear matter, and the comfort of being held in love and light.

Prayer may “work” by significantly connecting the one praying (or the person who is being prayed for) with the Jewish community and tradition- in our own time and through our ancestors, our history. For Jews especially, feeling connected to our community, having a sense of belonging and peoplehood is often an essential part of our spiritual expression.

Prayer may “work” by helping the one praying or being prayed for to connect to a deeper level of the self, which is already healed and whole, reminding the person of his or her essential wholeness. In the misheberach, the Jewish prayer for healing, we ask for refuat ha guf, healing of body, refuat ha-nefesh, healing of spirit and a refuah shleimah. In Hebrew, refuah means healing, and shleimah is often translated as complete. However, the word shelimah comes from the same root as a word you probably recognize, shalom, peace. The misheberach recognizes all the levels of healing - physical, emotional and spiritual - and it ends with an emphasis on shalom, the ability to be at peace with whatever life brings us.

Prayer may “work” in focusing the one praying on the blessings of his or her life, enabling him or her to magnify their sense of gratitude. A few years ago, I was visiting with a man who was undergoing treatment for serious illness. Toward the end of our visit, I asked if I could offer him a prayer and when he agreed, I asked him what I should pray for. Immediately, he asked me to pray for his family, to thank God for their love and support and all other people who had stepped up to help them. In the midst of his own suffering, prayer helped him notice the manifold blessings in his life.

Prayer can “work” when we are inspired to be a blessing in the world. As Rabbi Morris Adler wrote: “Our prayers are answered not when we are given what we ask, but when we are challenged to be what we can be.”

Prayer not only works in different ways, but it can take many different forms. In Judaism, we tend to focus on the formal prayers of our tradition - the Shema, the Amidah. For many Jews, we think of prayer as something that happens in Hebrew, a language that some of us can read, yet few of us are actually fluent in it.

When I was in Rabbinical School, I spent an additional year training in chaplaincy through an interfaith program for seminary students called Clinical Pastoral

Education. I was in a Suburban hospital outside of Philadelphia and was the only Jew in our group of seminary students.

There was a Mennonite, a Catholic, a Presbyterian, an evangelical Christian and me. Our supervisor was a Southern Baptist minister with a distinct southern drawl and I felt like a fish out of water.

I was assigned two floors and told to go visit the patients and pray with them. I was panicked. I had no idea what to do. Up until this point, prayer meant the words in the siddur, the prayer book. Most of the patients I visited weren't Jewish, so I couldn't pray in Hebrew. When I tried to explain this to my peers and my supervisor they had no idea what I was talking about. I felt like they were asking me to do something foreign, something that may not have even been Jewish.

Slowly I began to learn about prayer. Initially, I took the words of some of the prayers and translated them into English and I would read that. Then I found a booklet of Jewish healing prayers in English and I would read those with my patients. I was doing my job, but it still felt like we weren't really connecting.

During my internship, we would do overnights in the hospital attending to the Emergency room and all other critical situations in the hospital. It was intense and powerful. Accompanying families and their loved ones through all kinds of medical challenges. But it was painful, I was young and more often than not, I felt inadequate to the task.

Then one long evening, after attending to several families facing tragic situations, I opened the book of Psalms and began to cry. Here were the words of our tradition that gave expression to the pain and despair I was witnessing.

Psalm 130

Out of the depths I have cried out to you, please hear my voice, answer me.

Psalm 69

Save me, O God! The water is up to my neck;

I am sinking in deep mud, and there is no solid ground;

I am out in deep water, and the waves are about to drown me.

I am worn out from calling for help, and my throat is aching.

I have strained my eyes, looking for your help.

In that moment, I realized that prayer wasn't just a formula to be recited at certain times, but a way of reaching toward the Divine. A way of illuminating the sacred

thread woven through our lives. Prayer became a way of giving voice to my deepest longings – the sense that my life mattered, that the brokenness and despair that I witnessed was not meaningless, that ultimately I was not alone. As I learned to pray for myself, praying for others came naturally

Now, I love to pray with people. It is one of the most powerful ways I connect with the Divine when I can hold another person in my heart and lift up their concerns in a container that recognizes the sacred and allows them to see their lives against the backdrop of eternity. Prayer is a way of looking at the world with wonder and gratitude; recognizing the mystery and beauty at the heart of all creation.

Unfortunately, for many people the language of the mahzor, the prayer book, you hold in your hands can be a barrier. While for many the Hebrew is familiar and comforting, the actual meaning remains inaccessible. The English translations provide insight, but many of the prayers still contain theology and images that are foreign to modern Jews.

Let me suggest, you approach the text of the prayer book like great literature. When we read Shakespeare, we readily forgive the archaic ideas and linguistic challenges and read it for its poetry and complex insights into human nature. Prayer and liturgy are the same. They are poetic metaphors. Like great art or music, prayer opens a doorway to awareness, wonder, and understanding.

Sometimes we need to translate the words into language that makes more sense to us. Most of us know the opening formula to the prayers: Baruch Atah Adonai, Blessed are you, God. What does that actually mean? Why are we telling God that God is blessed? What does it even mean to be blessed? Fortunate, lucky, well-regarded? What those three words are invoking is a sense of amazement in us. We are acknowledging the sheer wonder and blessing of love and we are in turn thanking God for the blessing. Baruch Atah Adonai, thank you for this awesome and bountiful life...

Melech ha'olam, King of the Universe, sounds foreign, but what if we used the words mystery and eternity.....

Sometimes like great literature, prayer needs interpretation and study. Recently, a dear friend who is an English professor was telling me about a seminar she's teaching on Ulysses by James Joyce. I was embarrassed to admit that I had tried reading it on my own and never got very far. She laughed and reassured me that some pieces of literature are too complex to understand without the Cliff Notes.

Some of the prayers of the High Holidays are similar, It helps to take extra time and to find a guide who can help you engage in the deeper meanings.

Over the past two weeks, a group of us met to discuss the High Holiday prayers. We studied only one prayer in each of our sessions. The first week, we studied Psalm 27 that is recited during Elul, the month before Rosh Hashanah. And on the second week, we focused on the Thirteen Attributes, a prayer with only 18 words that we recite on Yom Kippur.

We spent an hour and a half looking at the poetry, the imagery, the themes, the message. each one was rich and complex and beautiful, but it took time and our group discussion in which we mutual guided each other. This kind of dialog is how our tradition comes alive. We are in fact a people of the book.

Of course, many of us wish we had time for this kind of engagement. You're here now, which is wonderful. So, let me invite you to use this time to sink into the prayers, and let the prayers sink into you. Linger over the words and the music, if you can't keep up with the service, don't worry, go at your own pace. Listen to the music. Let the melodies transport you. Enjoy the experience of interconnection, of being together in this room, knowing that Jews all over the world are doing the same thing. Enjoy the blessing of sitting still and notice your breath. Find a word or phrase that moves you and sit with it. Let it move through you, work on you. Even better, If you find a passage you really like, write it down and meditate upon it for a few days and see what happens.

I want to leave you with one simple prayer practice that has brought me great joy over the years. The Talmud¹ teaches that we should make one hundred blessings each day: "blessings that show our awe and love of God." For many traditional Jews who pray three times a day, it's pretty easy to reach this number, but for the rest of us, it takes some attention. At its heart, this is a gratitude practice. An opportunity to notice the blessings in our lives. Like anything, putting our thoughts into words concretizes them and reinforces our intention.

So, between now and Yom Kippur, take a few minutes a day to notice your blessings. You don't have to reach 100, but simply take a few minutes each day to notice what

¹ Rabbi Meir teaches in the Talmud (Menachot 43b) that we should make 100 blessings each day. He learns this idea from the verse that begins "And now Yisrael, what (Mah) does Adonai your God ask from you?" (Deut. 10:12). Rashi explains that Rabbi Meir means that we should understand the verse to read "Meah" (100) instead of "Mah." In other words, "And now Yisrael, God asks 100 from you." Since the verse continues that God wants us to be in awe of God, to love and to serve God with all of our hearts and souls, we understand the "100" to be 100 blessings that show our awe and love of God. (Menachot 43b)

you are grateful for. If you try it, let me know what you think. Try offering blessings as you encounter them. They don't have to be out loud or even in Hebrew. Baruch Atah Adonai, Blessed are You God, who gave me this bed to wake up in. Thank you, God for this amazing cup of coffee. Thank you for the sunlight streaming through the window. Baruch Atah Adonai for the sound of my child laughing. Thank you for the amusing text my brother just sent. Thank you for being alive another day. You get the picture. Notice all the blessings big and small and see what happens. And don't worry if you forget, you probably will, but sometimes you won't and when you do you can just start over.

Then at night, as the lights are out and you're waiting to fall asleep, recount all the blessings from your day. Again, start at the very beginning. Remember waking up and give thanks for the parts of your body that still work. Notice the people or animals you encounter in the morning and give thanks for them even if they're grumpy. Remember your ride to work and give thanks for the music on the radio, the car that works, the roads that get you to your destination. To tell you the truth, I usually fall asleep before I get much further than mid-morning, but it's often with a smile on my face.

As we enter into the New Year, may you find moments of prayer, of gratitude, of serenity to nourish your spirit. May they help you to connect more deeply with yourself and with everyone and everything that matters to you. And may the words on our lips and the meditation of our hearts, help us to bring greater love, healing and justice into the world.