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Temple Emanu-El

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There is a well-known Hasidic story that's popular around this time of year. Just before the High Holy Days, according to the story, a young rabbinical student is rushing through the street, running frantically with his arms filled with papers and books. He runs past an older rabbi in the community and the rabbi stops him. "Young man," he says, "why are you in such a hurry?" "The holidays are almost here," the student responds, "and I need to get my prayers in order before the services begin!" The rabbi smiles at him kindly. "My son, the prayers are in the same order they were in last year. Better to use this time to get yourself in order."

This is a story that is much beloved by members of the clergy, those of us who spend lots of our time ordering the prayers of the High Holy Days. Many of us find that it speaks to the heart of our spiritual processes as the Days of Awe approach. And since this is the point of our Elul sermon series, I'll let you in on a very personal truth: that as hard as the work is to get those prayers in order, it is often much easier than the dirty work of getting ourselves in order.

Of course, the story is also popular among people who aren't rabbis or cantors, because it expresses a very common perspective on prayer that a lot of us share. The story reminds us that Jewish prayer is, at best, a tool that can help bring us into union with God. The point of the Days of Awe isn't just that we should say the right words in the proper order; in fact, those prayers may not be holy in and of themselves at all. Their value emerges only to the extent that they can bring

us into relationship with the Holy. Especially at this time of year, the inclination of the heart and soul is what matters most, not the organization or the sequencing of our prayers.

That perspective is something that a lot of us can easily agree with. (I see lots of heads nodding out there!) Many of us regard prayer with a kind of benevolent suspicion. Sure, in principle, prayer is probably a good thing, a valuable skill. But when we think harder about it, the questions become more difficult. How do we really think we can benefit from prayer? Are these particular words really that important? Do we really believe in the sort of a God who regularly and reliably responds to human prayer? On the other hand, how can we believe in a God who ignores human prayer?

Just last week, an article appeared in the *Forward* under the headline “How Can a Siddur Solve the Problems of Prayer for Modern Jews?”¹ Yes, that’s right: the “problems of prayer.” The article was about the publication of a new prayerbook, but the author spends most of his time talking about a different underlying issue, which is basically that Jews today don’t know how to pray. Even among those who know how, the unspoken truth is that they still don’t really like it that much. Ultimately, the conclusion of this author (who, it should be noted, is a well-known scholar and professor of Jewish studies) is that prayerbooks come and go, and while some of them are better than others at leading worshipers into an attitude of reverence and awe, when you get right down to it, we Jews are just not that good at talking to God.

Why should this be? Well, according to the article, the reason that we don’t know how to talk to God is because we fail to see God as a decent partner in conversation. We never see God’s presence in our lives outside the sanctuary,

¹ See <http://www.forward.com/articles/112469/>.

and so when it comes time to start that conversation in the sanctuary, we just don't know what to say. Even the greatest prayerbook in the world can't do that job for us.

Here's how the article ends:

[H]aving alienated God from our work and our problems, ...is it any wonder that people sit...in synagogue...with nothing to talk about with God? Prayer feels like a forced conversation with a distant uncle, trying to elicit fragments of ancient family history, yet grateful for any possible interruption.

The critique stings, partly because it is harsh but mostly because it is true. Even among those of us who consider ourselves regular and literate Jewish worshipers, surely all of us have had this experience while trying to pray.

My charge for tonight is to speak on the subject "Embracing Prayer." It's a tough topic when so many of us don't always see prayer as something we can embrace with our hearts and minds as we think we should. The language doesn't come easily to us, or we don't feel comfortable relating to God in that particular way, or we're simply not used to assuming a prayerful attitude in our normal lives. So why should things be any different when we sit together in here, and Shabbat descends with a hush, and we are left alone with our thoughts, forced to do our best to pray – or at least do a convincing job of faking it?

In the interest of full disclosure, and in the spirit of this self-revealing Elul sermon series, I have to tell you that this is something I worry about a lot. I spend a lot of time ordering the prayers, but it is incredibly difficult for me to order myself, my thoughts, my private experiences of God in prayer.

I am comforted to know that I'm in good company with plenty of other Jews, and with other rabbis who struggle in this way as well. One rabbi who keeps an online journal writes², also just this past week, that

[n]o new prayer book is going to [resolve] this [issue].
[Because] words are not our only problem. The setting is wrong. The tone is wrong. The theology is wrong. The politics are wrong. The expectation is wrong. ... We expect to be bored and we are. ... Yes, it is my fault that synagogue is vapid and boring. But it is too hard to change things.

What we're discovering here is the secret that "Embracing Prayer" is not as easy or as fulfilling as we might like to think. Our prayers are supposed to carry us toward holiness, toward connection with the Divine, but how effective are they really? How well are these prayers doing their job?

Unfortunately, our people's problems with prayer only get tougher and more insoluble as we progress through the month of Elul and prepare to enter the High Holy Days. Out of the entire Jewish year, the Days of Awe are the one time when our liturgy is at its most challenging. Even for those High Holy Day worshipers who pray regularly and competently during the rest of the year, these prayers and their imagery are very difficult. We call God Father and King. We hope out loud that our sins will not lead God to erase our names from the Book of Life, that God's mercy will save us from death. These are not themes we're used to contemplating or words we're used to speaking during the rest of the year. It is really hard to be inspired by prayers like these.

What are we supposed to do, then? How can prayer be a tool of self-examination, let alone a path toward self-betterment, as it's meant to be during

² See <http://rabbirami.blogspot.com/2009/09/jewish-problem-with-prayer.html>.

this time of the Jewish year? We know that “embracing prayer” is something that we should do to grow in our relationship with God, but how exactly are we supposed to do that?

Tonight I want to suggest one possibility – at least for now, at least for those of us for whom prayer doesn’t always come easily – not a way to pray the kinds of prayers which propose to change God’s mind, to rearrange the order of the world for our sake. Instead, I want to suggest a simple way of renewing our embrace of prayer, but more significantly, renewing the way that we look at ourselves as people who pray.

The technique I want to suggest for taking the next step, or maybe the first step, toward renewing our prayer life is to start small, to work on deepening our comfort with the tiniest possible fragment of Jewish prayer. I want to propose simply that we concentrate on the most concise acknowledgment of God’s reality, words that we already know and understand and say all the time: “*Baruch Atah*” – “Blessed are You.”

I think that by starting there, we will have begun the most direct solution to the “problem of prayer.” Now we can’t totally get away from the anxiety of prayer, perhaps, but if we think carefully about what those two powerful words mean, saying them can lead us to a new beginning in the healthy and humble act of Jewish worship. Being able to say “*Baruch Atah*” with mindfulness and intention can help us, in three different ways, to enrich our experience in the coming High Holy Days and deepen the way we relate to God.

First: Embracing Jewish prayer means insisting that we can call God “*Atah*,” “You.” We acknowledge, before we say anything else, that there is something sacred outside of ourselves, and that Other is one with whom there is the

possibility of relationship. We call God “You,” just as we do when we speak to friends and spouses, parents and children. God grants to us the ability to speak in the familiar 2nd person, and we grant that courtesy back to God as well. Like Moses himself, we call God “You,” speaking face-to-face in loving familiarity with the Holy One.

Second: Embracing Jewish prayer involves the daring declaration that God is “*baruch*,” blessed. God is the greatest of mysteries, but we know and we proclaim that whatever God is, God is worthy of blessing. Imagine that. Whenever we invoke God’s name, when we eat and drink, when we celebrate and when we mourn and when we mark the passage of seasons and festivals, we say as one people, solemnly and joyfully, that the force behind this human experience of ours deserves our blessing.

Finally: When we say “*Baruch Atah*,” we affirm the act of prayer itself. The practice of human prayer is an audacious and wonderful thing; it says, in essence: We humans are dust and ashes. We know this. But nevertheless, it is our right and our obligation to take note of what is good and meaningful in the sacred presences outside of ourselves. And, bold though it may be, we flawed and frail human beings are the ones who can declare that God is, and that God is blessed.

We Jews pray in all kinds of different ways. We sit side-by-side, in this sanctuary and around our dinner tables, with our friends and with our families, in song and in silence. There are probably as many kinds of Jewish prayer as there are Jews. But what they have in common is the urge to turn toward God, to the source of life and truth, and to say: “*Baruch Atah*.”

The article in the *Forward* got it right: prayerbooks change all the time. Prayers change all the time. But, most reliably of all, we change. Thank God. As difficult as it is at times to contemplate how prayer could possibly affect the One to whom we pray, it is (thankfully) easier to consider how prayer affects the one who prays. We sit side by side, we sit together at easy times and difficult ones and we take solace in the fact that when nothing else seems in our power to change, we can change ourselves. We can soften our hearts. We can correct our deeds.

No rabbi can avoid the fact that this month of Elul is a time of getting our prayers in order. That's just sort of something that comes with the job. But, even more important is the job that your clergy share with all other Jews: the obligation to get ourselves in order. We take that job very seriously. And I am humbled and I am awed every year when I remember how we human beings have the ability to change who we are.

The opportunity and the obligation to embrace Jewish prayer is a challenging one indeed. But the ability to speaking to God, to say "*Baruch Atah,*" is an awesome reality. And when we manage to do so, when we succeed in our work, we can look with awe at the members of our congregation and see that we too are blessed.

B'ruchim hayinu b-vo'einu; b'ruchim n'hiyeh b'tzeiteinu –

As we were blessed in our coming in, so may we be blessed as we go forth from this place.

Amen.