

Prayer
10 Elul 5770
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Rabbi David Stern

Shabbat Shalom. Welcome again to our new and prospective members, welcome to all of those who have been away this summer and are now back, welcome to our college kids about to head off to school – remember Yom Kippur is on a weekend, and you can bring your laundry. And welcome to all who shared in such beautiful prayer experiences in the chapel and in Pollman Hall throughout the summer.

Tonight is the second in our series of Elul sermons, which will culminate the weekend of September 3 with Shabbat and Selichot and our wise and inspirational visiting teacher, Rabbi Or N. Rose. Our theme for this month of preparation is Sources of Jewish Transformation – last week, Rabbi Robbins spoke about Torah; next week, Rabbi Knight will speak about *gemilut chasadim*, acts of lovingkindness; and tonight I invite you to consider *tefilla*, the theme of prayer.

And while prayer can take place in multiple contexts in our lives – Shabbat, holidays, home, synagogue, communally, individually, at bedsides and sunsets - tonight I'm primarily interested in Jewish communal prayer – and more specifically, what might happen when we pray together on the High Holidays – though I think these reflections might apply to other prayer experiences as well.

Prayer can be gift and challenge, personal and cosmic, heart-rending and heart-mending. It invites us on journeys of connection that we may be hesitant to take – the journey within, beyond words to become acquainted with our own silent selves; the

journey beyond self to reckon with our responsibilities in relationship and community; the journey into the words and melodies of a tradition which connect us to generations beyond counting, and sometimes feel strange and new; the journey to a sense of joy or memory, sadness or wonder that for a moment allows us to feel something instead of thinking it; the journey, in a contemporary society so enchanted with the material, towards a sense of the ineffable Source of all Being.

So if prayer is about all those journeys, it's fair to ask: what should we pack? I'd like to start out by saying what I *don't* think you need. All of these have some value, but perhaps heretically, I'd like to suggest that they're not necessary. So just as we tell our Israel travelers that you don't need to bring a raincoat to Israel in the summer, here's what I *don't* think you need to pack:

I don't think you need a Ph.D. in the historical development of Jewish liturgy – which prayers come from which century or which source – because prayer is not primarily an intellectual activity.

I don't think – and I know some of you disagree – that you have to know the meaning of every sound you make, nor that every sound has to have meaning. The words of prayer are not ends in themselves, and though they reflect certain theologies, they do not function as theological declarations. They are vehicles and vessels, platforms for helping us to lift up our hearts. Think of the sound of the Kaddish, and how its rhythm and the associations we bring to it are far more powerful than the translation which most of us don't know. Sometimes sound itself – like the sound of a melody, or the untranslated sound of the Kaddish - transports us far deeper than the cognitive content of a word or phrase.

And perhaps most heretically, I do not believe there is any theological prerequisite to prayer. I don't think you need some settled, unswerving sense of what God means to you. The Psalmist didn't check questions and doubts at the door, and we shouldn't either. In fact, for prayer to be real, I believe you can't.

A sense of sources, of cognitive content, of theological conviction – can all of these enrich prayer? Absolutely. But I worry that more often than not, we elevate them to the level of prerequisites, and thereby measure ourselves as inadequate or ineligible. So for now, let's leave them at home and not violate the baggage limit. So now to the packing list:

First item: bring some chutzpah. There is the chutzpah that it takes to address our concerns to the Author of all Creation. But on a more practical level, remember that the time you spend in services on the High Holidays is your time, and I urge you to be a little selfish about what will make that time meaningful for you. I personally find great power in the flow and structure of the prayer service. But part of my annual urging at this season is to be a little less obedient about following the prayer book. If the congregation is reading or singing something that is not meaningful to you, give it a minute - try to find something in that sound, or one word in that prayer that has meaning for you, or prompts reflection, and stay with it. And if that doesn't work, than find a vehicle for your own reflections elsewhere in the prayer book. If we move on to a next prayer and you're not ready to move, don't move. As football season begins, analysts speak of good wide receivers as having "soft hands" – the ability for their hands to give and adapt as the ball arrives. We should hold the prayer book with soft hands – less rigidly, more open to the multiple possibilities within it and within ourselves.

Second item: a xylophone. Last year, I wrote in the Window about my experience of driving by the Tanglewood Music Center on the afternoon of a major concert. But I heard behind the hedge, far from the main performance space, the sound of a music student practicing her scales on the xylophone. When we join in prayer on the holidays, we may find ourselves swept up in the symphony – the grandeur of the music, the poetry of the prayer book, the comfort and power of so many Jews joining their hearts and voices in prayer. But don't forget your xylophone. On a tachlis level, if you own your own prayer book, I challenge you to stick at least one item of supplementary material among the pages before you leave the house. A favorite poem, a letter from a loved one, a picture, a reading from another prayer book that has touched you. You might consider, as I mentioned in this month's Window, taking the Gates of Repentance down off your shelf now, and beginning to flip through it. Fold down pages of prayers or readings that speak to you, and they can be your home base during your experience of the holidays.

I know there is a lot that militates against it – all those people reading something else, the expectation that you are supposed to be in lock step, the courage it takes to divert and diverge, especially if we don't feel comfortable or knowledgeable about the service. But even though the holidays sometimes feel like an obligation, or even a hassle, they are a gift. When else do we give ourselves hours at a time, and a full ten days, to think about our lives, our dreams, about what we want to mend in our hearts, our families, the world? The prayer book is designed to help us make those transformative discoveries, but the prayer book is only one tool. Bring your xylophone. Don't forget to somehow, amidst the masses, find space for the sounding of your own heart.

Third item: silence. The sounding of your heart may not involve any sound at all. We too often perceive the holidays as an event, but they are a process, a process which requires reflection. Silence allows us to do the listening which is a fundamental act of prayer. Listening to our hearts, listening to the whisper of God's wonder in our lives, listening for possibilities of courage and strength. As Michael Fishbane teaches, the silence of prayer is not the silence of negation, but the silence of anticipation and possibility – the silence as the conductor raises her baton before the first note is sounded; the silence that precedes all ethical speech. From Mary Oliver's poem, "Praying": "this isn't/ a contest but the doorway/ into thanks, and a silence in which/ another voice may speak."

Fourth item: humility, which of course stands in delightful tension with the chutzpah we already packed. But humility is just as fundamental to our prayer as chutzpah is. It is humility that allows us to shed all the protective layers we gird ourselves with everywhere else, even in our most intimate relationships. It is humility that allows us to open our hearts and see ourselves with clarity. And it is humility's acknowledgement of the fractures and fissures in our lives that is the beginning of growth, the beginning of faith, the invitation to the whisper of God's presence. Self-sufficiency is a slick and arrogant myth – its shine and sheen blind us to our connectedness to all of creation, and to the Creator of all.

Fifth item: truth. I think that's why services on the holidays stretch out over time, culminating in the all-day prayer of Yom Kippur – because it takes a long time to get to truth. I sense it in myself – on Rosh Hashanah, I am just getting used to the words again, getting used to seeing myself as connected to something greater again, reciting the

thoughts about looking within, but not quite feeling them. But by the time Yom Kippur rolls around, I am more ready, and the truth starts to peek through – about what I believe, about what I doubt, about what I’ve torn and how to mend it. Honest self-reckoning of course requires both the chutzpah and the humility we’ve already packed, and a good deal of courage. We can learn a lot about the rigors of truth with this 3-part meditation instruction from Sylvia Boorstein: “Pay attention. Tell the truth. Don’t duck.” Truth is the single most important item to pack for prayer – though we usually have to rummage around in our bags for a while to find it. But once we do, what glorious work of renewal can begin.

Sixth and last: compassion. Compassion for all who suffer in the face of injustice, compassion for the people we want to blame for our own woes, compassion for the people who may deserve blame for our woes, compassion for ourselves in all the imperfections that are part and parcel of our humanity. The compassion that allows my vision of my failings to be the beginning of a story of redemption and return. And importantly too, compassion for the people who are praying around us – on key and off key, whispering and not whispering, joined in silence or joined in speech. The holidays are a heady time – we may feel challenged to accomplish even one of the opportunities for prayer I’ve set out tonight, challenged to connect to God in any way. And that is where the 18th century Hasidic teaching of Rabbi Meshullam Feibush Heller comes in. He said, “Even if at that moment we are not able to pray with full reverence and love of God, our words of prayer can still rise up to the degree that we have fully connected ourselves to others.”

And so our journey towards prayer on the Days of Awe. We make our way with the reminder of another journey, the one from Egypt to the Promised Land. Rabbi Jonathan Slater reminds us that in Exodus 10, Pharaoh tries to tell Moses what he can and cannot bring with him on the way to worship God at the mountain. But Moses replies that the people will need to bring everything: *va'anachnu lo nayda ma na'avod et adonai ad ba-nu shama* – “for we will not know exactly how we will worship God until we get there.” The same is true for us – we will make our way, we will pack what we pack, and we will not know exactly how we will worship God until we get there. That is the humility that is the beginning of redemption, and we pray, the beginning of a new year of blessing and peace. Shabbat Shalom.