"Prayer Makes Us Worth Saving"
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Get busy living, or get busy dying. *Unetaneh tokef*, the prayer that reminds us of the fragility of our lives, also teaches that nevertheless we can transcend the limitations of our mortality life through three actions: *teshuvah, tefillah,* and *tzedakah*.

Yesterday, I suggested that we can understand *teshuvah* as rising beyond the limits of our individual selves, moment by moment, by envisioning the whole, by seeing and acting towards others as if we are fundamentally related to them. Today, I'd like to focus on how we might do the same by reconstructing tefillah -- prayer -- as a personal daily practice.

I've been at West End Synagogue long enough to know that this is a bit of a minefield and that for most of us prayer is not a given or a simple topic. There is a broad range of theologies among us, and there is an equally broad and strong range of feelings and beliefs about prayer. Many of us are profoundly uncomfortable with the concept of prayer, or would never describe ourselves as having a prayer practice. After all, we are allegedly the Jewish denomination that directs our prayer "To Whom it May Concern."

Communal, liturgical prayer – what we're doing today – is one act by which we connect with community and tradition. Just showing up to be with others is a key function of prayer. Some of us come to shul to converse with God, and some of us come to shul to schmooze with the people who are talking with God. Communal liturgical prayer can also be a way of connecting, through the words and melodies, with fellow Jews around the world and through history. For some of us, this identification with the words of tradition and with the people who have used these words by itself makes communal prayer meaningful.

But for many of us, the Hebrew of the prayers, the language and imagery can be so off-putting that communal prayer just doesn't work for us. We have will continue to work together to try to help ourselves re-translate the language of the siddur and machzor into terms that are more resonant for us – by learning Hebrew, by understanding prayer as a series of guided meditations on certain *middot* or qualities we want to cultivate in our lives, by examining roots or *shorashim*, and by writing our own, innovative liturgy.

One way we find resonance in the liturgy is by understanding it as poetry. This is how Rabbi Ed Feld, editor of Machzor Lev Shalem, the beautiful new Conservative movement machzor, describes the relationship between poetry and prayer:

> Ultimately, our lives and the reality we experience are mysteries. … The world as it unfolds, even as it contains its regular parade of day and night, times of the year, and seasons of life, still greets us with surprise. A poem speaks to these mysteries. By delineating it, by shining a light on pieces of it, the sense of mystery becomes manageable, the realm of mystery is more defined and thus less dangerous, less chaotic. We speak of being ‘‘moved’’ by poetry. It is not only that the poem introduces feeling, plays on our musical sensibility, or that it may activate a different part of our brain than linear rational thinking does, but, in expressing its ideas in the way it does, it helps us to ‘‘awaken.’’ Part of the journey of the prayer is to lead us to overcome [our] indefinable quality of un-ease. At its best, we leave the moment of feeling connected, perhaps to the universe, perhaps to our neighbor, perhaps to the divine.

Of course, music functions in much the same way as poetry; the Hebrew word for poem and song is the same. The music of communal prayer is an essential element, and we know from our monthly Shirat HaLev services that simply singing from our hearts instead of our heads can help us unlock the power of communal prayer. “The primary purpose of prayer,” said Abraham Joshua Heschel, “is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and [we] cannot live without a song.”

But if we define prayer only as communal or liturgical, we are missing some key dimensions of the word tefillah. Spontaneous, personal prayer has always been a major aspect of prayer in Judaism. So I’d like to suggest that when we hear the word tefillah, we understand it as going beyond communal and liturgical prayer. Let me suggest that we redefine tefillah as any action that lifts our spirits, that wakes us up to wonder, that activates our better selves, that triggers our sense that there is something larger than us in this world.

I believe each of us has some personal practice that moves us emotionally in this way. For some of us, it may be reading a good novel or fine literature; for others it may be working for social justice – as Rabbi Heschel said, when he marched for civil rights with Dr. King in Selma he felt as though he was davvening with his feet. For some of us, prayer may be the opera, or the Philharmonic, or the morning walk in Central Park, or noticing the crunch of a leaf underfoot on the sidewalk. For some of us it's dropping to our knees when we wake up or prepare for sleep, thankful for a day of abstinence from self-destructive patterns. For some of us, prayer is just a moment of grace that might come upon us the middle of the day, a sensation of inner peace.

For some of us it may be writing in our journal at the end of the day. For some of us, it's painting, or sketching, or sculpting. For others, it's a practice of *hitbodedut*, of going into nature and having a little chat with ourselves, with God, with whatever it is that fills us with a sense of awe and of the eternal in this world. Rabbi Nachman of Brztslav prescribed this kind of prayer, opening one's heart by being out in the world, as a daily practice:

Grant me the ability to be alone;
may it be my custom to go outdoors each day
among the trees and grass - among all growing things
and there may I be alone, and enter into prayer,
to talk with the One to whom I belong.
May I express there everything in my heart,
and may all the foliage of the field -
all grasses, trees, and plants -
awake at my coming, to send the powers of their life into the words of my prayer
so that my prayer and speech are made whole through the life and spirit of all growing things, which are made as one by their transcendent Source.
May I then pour out the words of my heart before your Presence like water, God,
and lift up my hands to You in worship, on my behalf, and that of my children!

The psalmist describes God as close to those who are willing to try to call, to those who are willing to open their hearts. The verse reminds us that in any situation, when we feel beset by the challenges of our lives, we can call out for help, we can sense we are not alone. We can experience a sense of something – call it God, call it whatever you want -- supporting us, moving through us. There are many, diverse moments when our hearts crack open a bit, and we come closer to what is real, true, and authentic in life. Often, for many of us, this happens in the midst of silence, when we are quiet enough to notice the still, small voice within and around us.

My friend and colleague Rabbi Nancy Flam at Institute for Jewish Spirituality has been investigating prayer as a spiritual practice for a number of years. This is how she describes the variety of experiences which might be characterized as prayer:

> So many phenomena fall under the category of "prayer" that we are mistaken to characterize it as if it were one activity or experience. In my own life, I know instinctive beseeching prayer that comes from a place of helplessness, pain, and want, not unlike calling for Mommy.
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> I know the kind of prayer Rebbe Nachman talks about, where my sole desire is to find a way back to some felt connection (any connection) to a sense of God's presence. I know talking-out-loud-at-thekitchen-sink-while-washing-breakfast-dishes prayer, once my husband has gone to work and my teenagers have gone to school, subtly reinforcing through the performance of speech the conviction that God is real and present.
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> I know prayer in shul with my community on Shabbat mornings, riding alone together on the currents of liturgy, as well as times at home myself with the morning liturgy. I know getting-up-in-the-morning prayer, saying traditional blessings to accompany each movement of waking, taking none of it for granted. I know prayer as the process of becoming so exquisitely still and receptive that the veils of separation lift. I know prayer as listening. Prayer comes in movement, in stillness, in song, in tears, in music, in silence, in words. The flavors are all

different, but the taste is the same: conscious awareness of the One, however dim or bright.

So here's a potential working definition for tefillah: any practice which connects us to a reality beyond or deeper than ourselves. You don't have to "believe in God." You don't have to have any theology at all. You don't have to use Hebrew, or the G word. You just have to be capable of being moved, of letting your heart crack open a bit, of sensing there is more to life that the limited, self-contained bubble in which we often experience our lives. And you have to be willing to seek out what Heschel described as "radical amazement" on a daily basis. And you need to practice, practice, practice.

We all know it's hard to develop a habit or practice on our own. We need support and accountability. Being part of this community gives us the chance to share our prayer practices, to discover new ones, and to begin to redefine ourselves as Jews who pray. "Prayer may not save us," said Rabbi Heschel, "but prayer may make us worthy of being saved." I think what he meant is that prayer takes us beyond the mundane; it anchors us to deeper truths we tend to lose sight of in the busyness of our lives.

People may be surprised to walk into our Reconstructionist synagogue on the Upper West Side on a Friday night or a Saturday morning and see a room full of highly intellectual – yes, even skeptical -- Jews singing our hearts out in prayer. I'm not surprised. There is no conflict between having a head and having a heart. That's why God gave us necks.

I encourage each of us to seek out a personal prayer practice this year – whatever it may be, meditation, nature walks, social justice work, and to share with each other what it is that moves us, that opens us, that helps us stay anchored in the deeper truths which help us find our way through the wilderness in which we live. May our prayers bring us comfort, strength, hope and healing -- and through them, may our lives become living, embodied prayers which bring blessing to everyone we meet.