

ROSH HASHANAH 5772 -- Second Day

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Yes, We Need to Keep Praying Together

(We began with a song -- [click here](#) and scroll down a bit on that screen)

*Mah gadlu
Ma'asecha Yah
M'od amku mach'sh'vo'techa*

How great are the things You have made, Adonai
How deeply Your thoughts penetrate

These are words based on Psalm 92, a psalm we recite every Shabbat in fact. According to one midrash, they were recited by Adam and Eve on the very first Shabbat, which that year was the second of Tishrei, the same date in the Jewish calendar as today. So today is in some sense the anniversary of these words.

The first two people, having just committed their first wrong act ever, contemplating the consequences, were left with a day of looking around their beautiful garden before they would be forced to leave. This is one of the thoughts they formulated: *Mah gadlu maasecha* -- there is so much grandeur and beauty that You have put here, God. *Me'od amku machsh'votecha* -- surely, we would have to dig deep into the ground, to know what nourishes it. So too with ourselves -- we have such potential, but the source of it, and the meaning of it, requires us to do a lot of digging. So let's keep digging! It's a good thought for Rosh Hashanah.

Now we have this melody, to sing together on Shabbat this year, and I've given you a little picture and story to go with it. I taught it today to set the mood, and to focus your minds, for some thoughts about prayer.

The most beautiful place in our synagogue is this place, this Sanctuary. The central place in our community is this place, this Sanctuary. Our feeling of community is most profound and most grand on days like today, in this Sanctuary.

And yet, the most mystifying things that we do as a community are the things we do in this Sanctuary. *Tefillah*. That is the Hebrew word for what we do in here. That's the word we usually translate as prayer.

In our liturgy for these holy days, we declare that the secret to the New Year is in three things: in *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, *utzedakah*. If we change ourselves and the path we are on -- if we engage in *teshuvah* -- then our life will be truly different. If we open ourselves to other people and respond to their needs -- if we engage in *tzedakah* -- that will transform our lives and reshape our world.

Is *tefillah*, prayer, in the same category? It might be a good thing and a Jewish thing to do, but is it up there with healing ourselves and repairing the world? I wonder how many Jews believe that today. I wonder how many believe that praying in the synagogue, using this book, can reorient your life and lead to change in the world.

It's pretty clear that most Jews don't believe that. That's why I want to talk about it, *b'rov am* -- in our largest gathering, at a time of prayer. First and foremost, because I do believe in the power of *tefillah*, aided by this prayerbook, surrounded by community, to shape our lives and our world. I believe it for you. As I did last year, I want to crank up a conversation about our spirituality, and invite you to engage it with me and with everyone in the community in the weeks and months ahead.

If you find *tefillah* to be difficult, you have good reasons. Here's a partial list, in no particular order.

One -- services in the morning are long. I'm pretty sure if you're committed to yoga or some other form of meditation, you only have to work at it for an hour or so at a time at the most. Our services on Shabbat morning are more than twice that long.

Two -- Hebrew. The prayers are in a foreign language -- two of them, if you count Aramaic, which is the language of the kaddishes.

Three -- even the English translations in our book are not always so lovely.

Four -- there are all these things that some people know how to do but I don't -- like bowing, swaying, saying certain words out loud -- and if I'm self-conscious how can I talk to God?

Five -- I don't know where there is room for my own words.

Six -- I feel spiritual on the ocean or at the lake, atop a mountain or in the woods, in a nightclub listening to soulful music, but not here.

Seven -- and by the way, I don't know if I even believe in God.

I don't know a single Jew who wouldn't nod their head to at least a couple of those things. That includes rabbis. Maybe all of them resonate with you. And you may be feeling some of these things even today, on a holy day where the prayer experience is hopefully even more meaningful than it is at other times during the year. When you know what the purpose of this day's prayers are.

How did we get into this situation? For a long time synagogues and rabbis in most American shuls were afraid of spirituality. In 1953, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel addressed the Rabbinical Assembly and called synagogues "the graveyard where prayer is buried." He said, "Our congregants preserve a respectful distance between the prayerbook and themselves." Jews, he said, are embarrassed to pray, to do something so unsophisticated and unmodern. Rabbis, Heschel said, were throwing in the towel, and no longer teaching or modeling prayer.

We are recovering as Jews from a very long sleep, induced by prior generations.

We could say, as many Jewish reformers and critics have said, that prayer in the synagogue isn't really that central. Instead, let us hang our hat on *teshuvah* and *tzedakah*. On Torah study and repairing the world. If we want to be moved, let's do it through special events -- music, drama. The many hours we could spend each year in services, let's spend it in service to others. What if instead of coming here on Shabbat we fanned out and volunteered for two and a half hours, tens of us each week? After all, does God need our prayers?

So, Rabbi, how you can tell us to put prayer at the center, along with *teshuvah* and *tzedakah*?

I don't imagine I can give an answer that will persuade all of you this morning. But I want you to know that you have a rabbi who absolutely understands the questions. I'm going to give two variations on one teaching, and show you one way to use it. This is just the start of the path. I hope my thoughts, and what you experience here on the Holy Days, will lure you to come back on a Shabbat. Because what we're doing then is, essentially, the same thing we're doing today.

Here's how our prayerbook works. A quick history lesson: The format of our prayers comes from about 1900 years ago. Originally, there was no book. There were psalms and the Shma, and then there was a basic outline of themes that was easy to remember. A one-sentence blessing on each theme was specified -- *Baruch Atah Adonai*. The person praying individually or leading a group could embellish on that theme, either spontaneously or by composing something or drawing on a set of options that were floating around. Only about 1000 years ago did communities start writing down official versions of these elaborations, and these became the standard prayerbooks.

If you bear this in mind, then the prayerbook and the service look a lot simpler. Essentially, the prayer service is an agenda.

Every time we say the Amidah, whether it's during the week or on Shabbat or today, we start with three sections, which we generally say out loud together in the morning service:

Baruch Atah Adonai, Magayn Avraham U'fokayd Sarah -- this is about the legacy of our ancestors.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Mechayay Hamaytim -- This is about faith in the face of troubles, illness, and death.

Baruch Atah Adonai, Ha-Ayl Hakadosh -- This is about an awareness of holiness.

And we always end with the three sections, which we generally are saying silently:

One is about prayer itself -- the hope that our prayers matter because of the focus with which we say them.

One is about gratitude, for the miracles of each day.

One is about peace.

So on the agenda every time we say the Amidah are these things -- history, strength in the face of adversity, holiness, intention, gratitude, peace. When I say the Amidah, it's a reminder to me that each of those things needs to be on my agenda.

When I reach the section about illness and death, I ask myself -- where is there illness and mourning, in my life or in the community? I think about people I know who are sick or in mourning, and ask myself whether I've reached out recently and remind myself to do that. When I reach the section about *shalom*, about peace, I ask myself -- where does a concern for peace fit right now in my life? There may be a conflict I'm in the middle of -- then I stop and think about what I need to do about it.

The agenda that the prayerbook sets forth is an agenda for living. For how to be a thoughtful person, moving out in the world with intention and with attention to what's going on in my life, with other people, and in the world.

There is another variation on this approach, and it's encapsulated in a teaching I'm very fond of by Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav. I've been referring to it every Shabbat morning lately. Reb Nachman teaches:

The worshipper must direct his heart to each and every word. He is like a man who walks in a garden collecting roses and rare flowers, plucking them one by one, in order to weave a garland.... Every word seizes hold of him... entreats him not to abandon it, not to break their bond, saying: *Consider my light, my grace, my splendor. Am I not the word 'Baruch'? Hearken to me when you pronounce me. Consider me when you utter me.*"

I love this image of the words as flowers. Reb Nachman invites us to see the prayerbook as a collection not of themes, but of words. Any given word could be the focus of our attention.

The handout you have is called a Wordle*. [Wordle](#) is a website that takes any text you put in, and generates an image of the words in it. You can see what words in a text are most prominent, and you can see every word stand on its own. This Wordle I gave out is from a translation of the prayer for peace, *Sim Shalom*. What I wanted to show you is how a single paragraph has so many beautiful elements in it. The Wordle suggests that when you encounter this prayer, you could meditate on any word in it that strikes you as meaningful in that moment. You can ask yourself -- why am I thinking about that? What's going on in my life that this word wants me to think about, to work on?

Here's my case: If you list out the agenda, the list of all the sections of the prayers, you have a list of all the things that a person needs to think about. There is nothing that's missing. Or if you go through the book word by word, you will find a word here and there that calls for your attention, that grabs you or goads you.

That's how prayer can work. Whether you're oriented toward a conversation with God, or with yourself. I don't know about you, but I don't think I could generate this agenda on my own.

I need help. That's why I use the prayerbook. And I need support -- that's why I pray in a community. So much self-scrutiny, so much holding ourselves to account, it's hard to sustain alone. We're here doing it together. And we really are. You know it today, you can feel how seriously everyone is taking the agenda today. I can tell you that it's true in our services each week on Shabbat. We don't just sing the words to sing them.

It's not easy to decode the prayerbook this way. That's why I decided that this is the year I really begin being a teacher of prayer. Already this month, I have started each Shabbat morning to teach a word or a phrase for a couple of minutes during the service. I do my best to give you my translation of how you can understand and think about a particular word. Maybe that word or that phrase will start to resonate with you, and become part of your personal prayer. Then you can learn that word or phrase in Hebrew, and mouth or chant it to yourself, to make it part of your body and your being as well.

* This is attached at the end of the sermon.

Once a month, the service for the first hour will not be the regular service here, but a service of learning. We'll sing and study and discuss, answer questions. Learn what each flower is. Weave a garland, bit by bit. Build a repertoire of prayers that each of you can rely on and look for.

I've started [publishing those prayer teachings on the Web](#), and will begin next month to create binders that you can use with or instead of the regular prayerbook, so you have something in writing and don't have to rely on remembering my talks. This will be a continuation of the things that I've written for you in the [Guide for the Machzor](#) that hopefully you've found helpful in these services.

So I invite you this year to take a leap of faith. Not necessarily the biggest leap of faith, in the whole idea of the Blessed Holy One. But in the possibility that praying together can recharge you, and reconnect you. And while the prayer by ocean and the woods is incredibly powerful, and there is nothing like it, there is also nothing like this: *tefillah b'tzibbur*, prayer in community.

That's the other leap, and I believe that what we have been doing yesterday and today, makes it an easier one to take. I said it yesterday, and say it again: Look at everyone here. All here because, even with all that we would normally do on a Friday morning, we are thinking about our lives. About what they mean, what we have done, what we have learned and still need to learn. Look at us here, building on the visions of our ancestors, projecting that forward, into another year. That, you can only get in here. And you can have that here every Shabbat.

(We finished by singing again together:)

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