

Yom Kippur Morning 5763
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What Does God Pray?

Like a proud mother after an 84 month gestation period, I am more than relieved to announce that this year - in fact in just three short months, we will be dedicating the new TBS prayer book for Shabbat and the festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.

It has literally been seven years in the making since we first conceived of creating a prayer book reflecting the worship style of TBS and to serve as an inspiration and invitation to prayer for our congregants for years to come.

It is both an old and new Siddur. It draws upon the ancient liturgical traditions of our people and the insights of our Reform teachers to bring us a prayer book that will be instructive as well as inspirational; one that will appeal to the mind as well as the spirit.

I take this opportunity to announce the introduction of our new Siddur today, because prayer plays such an important part of this sacred day of Yom Kippur. As the climax of our High Holy Days, Yom Kippur has come to be - for many of us - the singular most prayer-filled day of the Jewish year. Note that I said, "prayer-filled" not "prayer-full" day of the year. This day is filled with prayer from early this morning until the last rays of the sun begin to fade on the western horizon. But, is it a *prayerful* day for us? I believe that depends on how much we know about prayer and how much we bring to the prayer experience of this or any other day.

Prayer is central to Jewish tradition. The first organized prayers in Jewish tradition were associated with the Temple in Jerusalem - the one built by Solomon almost three thousand years ago. The prayers that have come down to us from those days are the words of the psalmists.

These prayers were public prayers, and recited as part of the sacrificial cult, which dominated the worship in the Temple. Individual prayer - such as it may have been - was subordinate to the prayers and sacrifices of the Temple, carried out on behalf of the people through the vicarious offices of the priests and Levites. So long as the people paid their tithes, brought their sacrificial offerings, and came in pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year, they were off the hook. Little more liturgically was expected of them.

Then, in 586 BCE, some three hundred years after Solomon built his Temple, the Babylonians destroyed it and sent the majority of Jews into exile. It was during that exile that we learned to live as Jews - that means that even though we lived thousands of miles away from Jerusalem and even without the spiritual benefit of the holy Temple, we maintained our Jewish identity and our faith.

Upon our return from Babylonian exile under the leadership of Nehemiah and the religious stewardship of Ezra the priestly Scribe, things began to change in the ways that Jews worshipped.

With the return of the exiles in about 450 BCE, Ezra established the Great Assembly of 120 notables and leaders of the people. It was the delegates of that Great Assembly who, according to our rabbinic tradition, set the formula for Jewish worship. It was the Men of the Great Assembly who gave us the prayer formula that is the familiar foundation of so many of our prayers. Thus, the prayers that we read today are steeped in more than 2,500 years of Jewish tradition.

During the period of the second Temple from about 450 BCE until its destruction by the Romans in 70 CE, private prayer began to complement the worship that took place within the precincts of the Temple in Jerusalem. This was the time when the synagogue began and communal worship took on its present day universal character in Jewish life. In the synagogue, everyone prayed, not just the priests. This was the time of democratization in Jewish worship. But, so long as the Temple stood, the "main" worship in Jewish life took place there, and was led by the hereditary priests, the descendants of Aaron.

On Yom Kippur, the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctum of the Temple. There, he recited God's ineffable name three times as the culmination of the elaborate rituals of the Day of Atonement.

According to the account of our rabbis preserved in the Talmud, the High Priest wore a rope around his waist as he made his way - absolutely alone - into the holy of holies. The rope he wore served a very practical purpose. Because, in the event that the High Priest said or did something wrong, it was generally believed that he would be struck dead for his offense. Yes, right then and there.

As only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, the rope enabled his assistants to safely pull the corpse of the High priest out of the inner-sanctum in the event of mishap.

Hmmm, I wonder if that is why people don't pray more. Are we afraid that we will be struck by lightning if we don't do it right? Well, don't worry; never in our history did we ever lose a High Priest on Yom Kippur!

Our rabbis built upon the foundation of prayer created by the Men of the Great Assembly and crafted our own liturgy during the later years of the Temple in Jerusalem. Their liturgy is familiar to us in the form of many of the prayers that we recite on this holy day and every day. Because of the liturgical genius of our rabbis, when the Romans destroyed the Temple - Judaism's sacrificial center - the Romans failed to destroy the spiritual center of the Jewish people. Our presence here today gives proof to that fact.

So, you see, prayer binds us to our past and gives us roots in our tradition in a very real way. We feel that connection here today. Can you?

But, it is more than nostalgia that warrants our prayers, certainly, we must ask, *why pray*? What benefit is there for me to pray at all? Here's what prayer can do:

Prayer can restore us. We all need inspiration, and we all need to know that there is a reason for our presence on this spinning green and blue planet of ours. Prayer can uplift us and inspire us in words created thousands of years ago, but spoken as if they sprang spontaneously from our lips. We need perspective, and certainly, our prayers can give us perspective.

After this particularly trying year for our nation and our people, I take a great measure of comfort from these words of our High Holy Day liturgy, which we read at the end of last night's service before the Kaddish.

Birth is a beginning

And death is a destination.

And life is a journey:

From childhood to maturity

And youth to age;

From innocence to awareness

And ignorance to knowing;

From foolishness to discretion

And, then, perhaps, to wisdom;

From weakness to strength

Or strength to weakness -

And, often, back again;

From health to sickness

And back, we pray, to health again;

From offense to forgiveness,

From loneliness to love,

From joy to gratitude,

From pain to compassion,

And from grief to understanding -

From fear to faith;
From defeat to defeat to defeat -
Until, looking backward or ahead,
We see that victory lies
Not at some high place along the way,
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,
A sacred pilgrimage.
Birth is a beginning
And death a destination.
And life is a journey,
A sacred pilgrimage -
To life everlasting.

No, life is not perfect - it can try us and daunt us. But, our Jewish tradition assures us that life is a sacred journey, if only we acknowledge that fact. That is what prayer is all about - it reminds us about the sacredness of our lives, including the trials and troubles that beset us. And so, when we pay heed to our prayers, we can find strength to meet life's challenges and find meaning in the hard times, just as we find joy in the good times. Prayer reminds us of the sacredness of life and of our connection to that which is divine in the universe and, within us. Thus, it has tremendous transformative power. It can truly change our lives.

Prayer can motivate and challenge us. Prayer does not allow for complacency or indolence. It rouses us to seek the best and be the best that we can be. It motivates us to give thanks for our many blessings, while challenging us not to ignore the suffering of others. When we pray in the Morning Service for God to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and free the captive, we know that God works through us and that a better world will come about *only* if we make it happen. Praying with a prayerful heart helps us get our priorities straight in life.

Prayer is healthful. A recent study by the Harvard University Medical School revealed that people who are accustomed to prayer are, by in large, healthier than people who do not pray regularly. Moreover, those who pray are better able to heal when ill and do so more quickly than people who do not pray.

Dr. Herbert Benson, a cardiologist at Harvard, has stated that in his research he has found that a person's belief in prayer is a powerful resource that may well enhance the healing power of a wide range of medical treatments.

So, you see, there are many reasons why prayer is important. But, prayer is work - it is called *avoda* in Hebrew, which translates as both "worship," and "work." Prayer takes effort and regular effort if it is going to work.

And yes, prayer is even a little bit like exercise - that is, we *know* we should do it. And, we *know* that we should be regular in our regimen. But, just as with exercise, we just don't follow through with it, do we?

Prayer has significance when we allow ourselves to recognize its importance and make it a real part of our lives - not just a once or twice a year ordeal.

So important is prayer in our tradition that our rabbis of the Talmud pose an interesting question.... "Does God pray?" To which they add this corollary, *if* God prays, then, *what* does God pray?

This debate is found in the Talmud in the tractate *<hebrew>* - which, as the name suggests, deal with prayers - *<hebrew>* and debates the nature and structure of Jewish worship.

I would like to try something with you right now. I would like to engage in a bit of text study with you. Now, given that there are about 1,200 people here right now, this may be something of a risky experiment. However, we are called the People of the Book. That refers to our literary tradition. We find our legitimacy and our authority in our texts. Perhaps you have never studied or even seen the Talmud before. Well then, here is your opportunity to study a bit of Jewish text now to gain some insights into prayer.

The ushers have provided you with texts, if there are not enough to go around, please share yours with someone nearby.

Our text is taken from the Talmud, tractate Berakhot, page 7a. [*You will find it in the original Aramaic text on one side of your study sheet and the English translation on the other side, so you can follow along.*]

Rabbi Yohanan, quoting Rabbi Yose said: "How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be God, prays? Because scripture says, *Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer* (Isaiah 56:7). Note, it is *not* said, [house of] *their prayer*, rather, *My prayer*; hence [we learn] that the Holy One, blessed be God, prays.

Thus, according to Rabbi Yohanan, God prays due to the logical conclusion that *My house of prayer*, implies that it is the house where God prays. Well and good, so we have a scriptural

suggestion that God prays. Now, we proceed to the next logical inference. For, if indeed God prays, then exactly *what* and *to whom* does God pray? The Talmud continues:

What does God pray? Rabbi Zutra ben Tuviah quoted in the name of Rav: "May it be My will that My mercy suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with MY children with the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.

In other words, God prays that the divine attribute of mercy will allow for God's children - us, to be judged with loving mercy, rather than by strict and impersonal justice. The rabbis are teaching us that God forgives us and comforts us, and accepts our human frailty as the obverse side of the nobility of the human spirit. In other words, God takes us seriously, but with compassion. God understands us - that is the essential message of this Yom Kippur day, isn't it? And the text continues -

It has been taught, Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha said: "I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary - the Holy of Holies] to offer incense, and there I saw *Akatriel Yah*, Adonai Tzeva'ot - the God of Hosts - seated upon a high and lofty throne. He said to me, 'My son, bless Me!' I replied, 'May it be Your will that Your mercy may suppress Your anger and may Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, so that You may deal with Your children according to the attribute of mercy, and thus, on their behalf, stop short of the strict limits of justice!' Then God nodded to me."

Incidentally, from this we learn that the blessing of an ordinary person must not be taken lightly.

So, what do we glean from this? If we look just on the surface level, then we might skeptically surmise that our rabbis believed that God prays to God-self expressing very human emotions, possessing human attributes of mercy, justice, anger, etc. Truthfully, for we moderns, this is not a very satisfying theology, is it? Could any of us, in our science-minded, logical, modern world believe in such a God?

Neither did the rabbis. I might point out that on the previous page of Talmud the question is raised as to whether or not God wears T'fillin - phylacteries, and what is written in them. I sincerely do *not* believe for a minute that the rabbis held to such anthropomorphic images of God. After all, these are the *same* rabbis who insist as an article of faith about God that God has no likeness or any form.

God is Being. God is not formed in the shape or likeness of any being.

Having no form - neither forehead nor arm to wear them - how could God wear T'fillin. The notion is absurd. The rabbis were not stupid, rather, they were masters of religious metaphor - the language of spiritual poetry that enables us to soar above the limits of human speech and lift us to new heights of human understanding.

Surely, we must realize that human language - being a human invention - is an imperfect means to describe the indescribable and to express the inexpressible. That is what religious metaphor is

all about - whether it be a story from the Bible describing how the knowledge of good and evil came into the world with the bite of a piece of fruit, or a prayer expressing our awe and wonder at the majesty of God's creation, and our humble human hopes for a good year. Such metaphors help us to transcend the limits of human language.

So, as metaphor then, what does this text from the Talmud teach us? It teaches us that God needs us.

If the world is to be made a better place - if creation is to be taken to the next level - we must participate with God in making it happen. In our Talmud text, when he had his vision of God, Rabbi Yishmael, the High Priest of his generation, was performing the very Yom Kippur ceremony that I described earlier. In that vision, God asks Rabbi Yishmael for blessing! And Rabbi Yishmael responds as if saying, *Please God, may You make us worthy of Your mercy by our actions and by our humanness, and, we forgive You as well.*

This text is about a God who relies upon us - you and me - to make things right. This is especially true when the world seems to witness that God has failed us. It means that when the world seems to be going to hell in a hand basket, God needs us most.

Yes, God needs us, and God needs our forgiveness. Now, that's an interesting concept - especially on this Yom Kippur Day of Judgment! God needs *our* forgiveness! But how can we forgive God -

Why does God allow the terrorist attacks?

Why are children raped and murdered?

Why do we experience draught and disastrous fires?

Why so much illness and suffering by good people?

If *we* stand on trial today, why isn't *God on trial* for all that is wrong in our world?

The answer is that we need to forgive God, just as God prays that God needs to forgive us. Our tradition teaches us that we are *partners* with God in putting things right. The Talmud text instructs us that, the blessing of an ordinary person must not be taken lightly. Each of us has a stake in support of God's creation - a stake in Heaven. That is what our *brit* - our Covenant is all about. When we recognize this then we are locked in sacred union with God. What each of us does has significance. It is up to us whether or not we chose to recognize that fact. Each of us has a reason, a sacred purpose, for being on this earth, and for being here, in this sacred place today.

And, we must understand that we are not alone. We are not living in isolate *from* the world, but in sacred engagement with the world. That is why we pray *together* as Jews - not just alone in private meditation. We need the strength that we get from each other and we need the sacred synergy and inspiration that we get from sharing our timeless tradition.

And what about the skeptics among us? What about those who don't believe in God - even in the powerful metaphor that we use to understand God?

There is a story told of the great Rebbe Levy Yitzhak of Berdichev, the Hasidic master. He taught that God made *everything* for some good - for some higher purpose. For example, a wildfire may allow for new and needed growth. Illness may give us more compassion for others. Financial setbacks may remind us that there is much more to life than what money can buy.

Everything, Rebbe Levy Yitzhak taught, has *some* value, *some* good purpose in God's creation.

Well, you know, there is always a wise guy - someone who wants to stir the pot - and, sure enough, one challenged Rebbe Levy Yitzhak. "Okay," he said, "if God made everything for a purpose, why did God make atheists? Do atheists serve any purpose?"

To this, Rebbe Levy Yitzhak replied, "Yes, it is even good that God created atheists. Why? Because when a person comes up to an atheist with a problem, the atheist cannot say it God's fault, or that God will help that person and make everything okay."

This is the essence of what I believe is religious humanism - no oxymoron at all, but, rather, a real and practical theological construct. When the world is gone awry, when things aren't going our way, when everything seems to be crashing down upon our heads, we say with either fatalism or misplaced anger, "It's God's will." We say, "It's God's will," when we don't want to take responsibility for what is happening to us and around us. We say, "It's God's will" when we want a scapegoat upon which to put all our own inadequacies and fears. We say, "It's God's will" in hopes that someone *else* will deal with our problems for us.

This is *not* religious humanism. Religious humanism is expressed in the old Jewish adage, *Pray as if everything depends upon God and act as if everything depends upon you.*

That is expressly why we are here today. To pray as if everything depends upon God - to come to grips with our humanness and our shortcomings, but also to stretch ourselves to the limits, and to understand that a measure of the divine abides within each individual, and within each of us.

As a covenanted people, our religious humanism demands of us that we assume responsibility for our lives. That is why we are here today on this sacred Yom Kippur. That is precisely how we can effect real and meaningful change in our lives through the transformative power of prayer.

Prayer is a sacred means for us to take hold of our lives, to get perspective about what is important and what is not, and to inspire us to action.

So many prayers today. This sanctuary is filled to overflowing with prayers and melodies sanctified by time and tradition. It is a *day* filled with prayer. But what about our *hearts*? Are they but empty vessels of longing, regret, and fear - or can we allow for the hours that remain of this Yom Kippur to become *prayer-full*, not just *prayer-filled*, so that we may find this day

spiritually fulfilling. If we accept this challenge, then we can help to ensure that this next year we will be sealed in the Book of Life with signatures of blessing.

AMEN.