

Sermon for Kol Nidrei Night 2013

The Power of Prayer

I was walking down Forbes Avenue after services for Rosh Hashana and I passed the Bagel Factory. There on the billboard outside was a sign that read "Place your Yom Kippur Order Today." I smiled. I had a half of mind to go in the store to place my order for a pound of forgiveness, a crow sandwich, a dozen "I'm sorry's" and a slice of humble pie. I like signs that have double meanings.

Tonight I want to talk about ways in which God has equipped our bodies and souls to self-soothe, provide for uplift, and intensify our moods. I think of five primary ways that the body triggers uplift through laughter, tears, sex, talking with a friend or counselor, and prayer. The first three are self evident. Those of you who are interested in sex are going to have to come to my Talmudic stories Wednesday evening classes. Talk therapy really depends on the dynamic between listener and talker. Prayer is the most elusive of the five. "Word, words, words," a Buddhist congregant once said to me in critiquing what's wrong with Jewish prayer. "Too many words," she said. Especially on Yom Kippur, the constant flow of words is often overwhelming. How can we discover how the prayers we say today can be meaningful for ourselves and get the attention of God?

There is an interesting story told in the Talmud about the Roman governor of Judea coming to Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who was then the head of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. The governor's questions were always meant to trip up the rabbi and find a way of putting down the Jewish religion in order to prove that Roman paganism was superior to Jewish monotheism. This time the governor asked, "Give me your opinion, rabbi. Is it a good thing to pray to your G-d very often?"

The rabbi thought a minute and then responded, "No. It is actually not good to pray too often to G-d."

"What? ", asked the governor in amazement. "Why do you mean? Why do you think it is not good to pray to your G-d too often?" The governor had prepared a good comeback: if the Jews believed that they would receive God's favor by praying to G-d often, he could then say to the rabbi, "So why do the Hebrews have no power and no freedom other than the freedom we Romans give you to practice your religion? Where is your G-d to protect you and keep you free and give you power over yourselves? Your G-d must not be very powerful." But the rabbi did not give the governor any opening. In fact, he gave him an answer that the governor did not expect to hear.

The rabbi listened to the governor's question and answered, "If a person prays to G-d too often, he or she becomes too familiar with G-d. And it is not good for a person to become too familiar with G-d."

The governor was not pleased at all with the rabbi's answer and he was also very unhappy that he could not think of any way to refute what the rabbi had said. He walked away from the rabbi frustrated and angry that he could not say anything to the rabbi that would help him disprove the power of G-d over the power of the Roman gods and goddesses.

The next day the rabbi came to the governor's palace and as soon as he saw the governor, he cried out, "*Shalom Aleykhem* (Peace be with you) oh mighty Caesar!" A little while later, the rabbi came back to the palace again and as soon as he saw the governor, he immediately cried out again, "*Shalom Aleychem*, oh mighty Caesar!" The rabbi came back a third time that morning, too, and as soon as he saw the governor a third time, he shouted, "*Shalom Aleychem*, oh mighty Caesar!"

At the third "*Shalom Aleykhem*" the governor became angry and swore at the rabbi, "What kind of game are you playing? Are you trying to make fun of me?"

"May your ears hear the words coming out of your mouth, oh Caesar," replied the rabbi. "If you, who are a *melekh bassar v'dam* (a flesh and blood, human ruler) are offended when I give you too many greetings, how do you think G-d, who we believe rules over all rulers on earth, would feel about receiving a constant barrage of greetings? Do you now understand why I said that it is not good to impose too much on G-d by praying to G-d too often?"

This story, on the surface, appears a little strange. How can a person pray too often to G-d? How is it possible for anyone to offend G-d by praying too often? The commentaries on this Talmudic story state that the intent of the story was to give Jews some insight into the meaning of prayer and to help us better understand what we need to do when we approach G-d to pray. The rabbinic commentaries call prayer "*Avodat HaLev*", which means "service of the heart". Before we undertake the act of praying, we need to first look within ourselves into our hearts and focus both our hearts and our minds on what we are going to say when we pray to G-d. We need to do this before we start to pray. *Khasidim* call this process "*kavanna*" (Hebrew for "intention") — this means drawing the energy from a place that is deep within ourselves and concentrating and centering all that energy on the prayers we are about to recite. The act of establishing *kavanna* is what enables each of us to enter into a proper frame of mind and heart when we pray.

The Baal Shem Tov used to take long walks alone in the forest to cleanse his mind of impure thoughts every day so he could concentrate all his energy on his spiritual center. Only after doing this, did he begin to recite his prayer. He did this three times per day—morning, afternoon and evening. The Chassidic opponents of the day, the *Mitnagdim*, criticized the Baal Shem Tov for taking too long to prepare himself and by doing so, violating the "*z'man t'filah*", the window of time during the day in which each of the three daily services needed to be recited. A *Khasidic* story illustrates this idea. When Levi Yitzkhok Berditchever, a famous student of the Baal Shem Tov, was asked by one of his students what he prayed for when he prayed, Rabbi Levi Yitzkhok did not hesitate to respond, "*Ikh benk der Riboyne Shel Oylom az mayne davenen zol zayn mit'n gants'n hartz*" ("I pray that when I pray, it should be with my entire heart.")

The conflict between the *Khasidim* and the *Mitnagdim* (those who opposed the *Khasidim*) is a metaphor for some of our own internal conflicts about the meaning of prayers and about what is best and most appropriate for us to do when we undertake the recitation of a prayer, be it in the synagogue or be it in a private place. All of us pray many times and in many different ways. We pray at home when we recite prayers like the *Kiddush* or the *HaMotzi*.

We pray communally when we come to the synagogue. When our voices join together with the voices of others during a communal prayer service, we sometimes are able to walk away feeling something profound and intense and we are often unable to explain that feeling in words. We also pray privately sometimes when we are struck by a personal need or by an urge to speak to G-d. Those personal moments when we want to pray are often very intense and when we experience a moment like that, our spirits are deeply and fully engaged. We could easily say

that establishing *kavanna* is never difficult when we are reciting a personal prayer but that it can be extremely difficult at other times. Finding and sustaining the proper *kavanna* is not easy and I think that every one of us has sometimes felt our prayers to be lacking in proper *kavanna*.

Jean Paul Satre once said, “Everyone should walk though life of the verge of tears.” Victor Hugo once said, “He does not weep who does not see.” I think the same could be said of prayer. We stray from prayer much of the time --and that is okay—but to keep *kavanna* in our mental toolbox so that prayer might give clarity to our seeing and gratitude within our hearts.

On *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*, there is an element added into the service that helps us be more successful at reaching the place in our personal energy centers where *kavanna* lies. That element is the *shofar*. In the ancient Temple in Jerusalem, the *shofar* was blown every day to call the priests and anyone else who was at the Temple at that moment to prayer. The sound of the *shofar* is said to resemble human tears. Its three sounds—the *t’kiah*, the *shevorim* and the *t’ruah* are all different ways in which we human beings shed tears. The long note of the *t’kiah* is like a loud cry or a long sigh—an expression in sound of feeling that rises up from the depth of our spirits. *Shevarim* is a broken *t’kiah*—its length is the same length as a *t’kiah* but broken into three shorter notes. *Shevarim* is actually the Hebrew word for “things that are broken” or “shards”. It symbolizes the tears within us that come from the broken places within us. By meditating on *shevarim*, we draw energy together from all our broken places. *T’ruah*, nine rapid sounds, is the rapid sound that comes when our tears reach down into the deepest places within us. Each of us has experienced the sequence of movements from *t’kiah* to *shevarim* to *t’ruah* in some way. It is paralleled in the cries made by an infant. Listen carefully when an infant cries and you will hear all three of these sounds. The tears of an infant are an outcry for help and for healing and for comfort. Tears are the quintessential expression of what makes us human.

The *Midrash* tells us that when Adam and Eve disobeyed G-d and ate from the Tree of Knowledge, they were banished from Gan Eden and told that from that point on they would have to work hard for their food, their sustenance and their security. This was the first human experience with pain. On an emotional level, their inner balance and equilibrium was permanently shaken and altered. They were the first human beings to experience pain and suffering and their legacy was passed on to all generations of human beings till today. The *Midrash* says that when Adam and Eve understood what pain meant, G-d came to them and gave them something they were not originally born with—the capacity to shed tears. G-d showed Adam and Eve the first tear and told them, “When pain and grief overtake you and when your hearts ache so much that you feel you can no longer endure the pain and when anguish grips your *neshama*, at that moment tears will fall from your eyes. And as the tears fall, your pain and your burden will feel lighter.

The *Midrash* says that when Adam and Eve heard these words from G-d, tears welled up in their eyes and rolled down their cheeks and fell down to the earth. And it was these first tears that moistened the earth. Adam and Eve left them as an inheritance to their descendants and whenever a human being is in pain and has an aching heart and spirit, tears begin to flow and the tears lift the gloom and despair from them and help them heal and grow whole again.

This, I think, is the true power of prayer. Prayer is the vehicle through which our *neshamot*, our souls, shed tears and when our souls have finished shedding tears, our spirits rise and feel healed and whole again. Henry Ward Beecher once wrote: “Tears are the often the telescope by which men see far into heaven.” This is why the rabbi told the Roman governor that we Jews believe that it is not good to pray to G-d too often. In order for prayer to really have meaning, we must attempt to recite it with *kavanna*. True *kavanna* is something that comes to us

infrequently. It comes to us with difficulty and only after an inner struggle. The search to find true *kavanna* when we pray is an ongoing struggle for each of us. When our inner energies converge within our spirits, we can reach a moment of true *kavanna* and at that moment, often, tears are at least felt whether or not they are actually shed. The tears we shed can come from painful places but they also come from feelings of joy. Sometimes they come when we tap into feelings of both pain and joy.

It is interesting to note that in Biblical times, it Yom Kippur that is referred to as Rosh Hashana, the “head of the year,” in the Book of Ezekial. Yom Kippur was clearly associated with the New Year festival. The first day of the seventh month was called “Yom Truah,” the day of making noise, whether through shouting, sounding a trumpet or a shofar. It is entirely possible then that “Yom Truah” was an end of year festival and its prayers were associated with wordless shouts rather than articulated words. At the end of the year, when we are all out of words, we cry out for God’s love, God’s mercy, God’s attention to the hurts in our lives. When there are no words, we revert to the infantile noises of sobbing and yelling. When the 10th day of month arrives, we roll out the document of words we want to say, words we need to say because the words name the change we seek in our selves. When we “Shma Koleynu,” we seek out a merciful father. When we say “ashmnu,” we let go of the humiliation we’ve been carrying. When we say “Adonai, Adonai... erekh apayim,” “God! God! You are exceedingly patient,” we look to have patience with ourselves.

The shofar wakes us up with its primordial sound. On *Rosh Hashana* we listen reflectively to a long sequence of *shofar* blasts and use them to heighten our sense of *kavanna*—attentiveness to the prayers we are reciting. It is a wordless prayer. On Yom Kippur, there is no *shofar* service, especially on *Shabbos*, when the blowing of the *shofar* is forbidden. On Yom Kippur, we replace the shofar with words. On *Yom Kippur* we need to try harder to focus our minds and hearts in a *kavannadige* way, a way that is even more attentive to our words than on *Rosh Hashana* because on *Yom Kippur* we have no crutch like the sounds of the *shofar* to lean upon. On *Yom Kippur* we need to try to hear the sounds of the *shofar* within ourselves, because we won’t hear it on *Yom Kippur* until the end of the fast at the end of *N’ilah*.

As we think about the sounds of the *shofar* we heard last week on *Rosh Hashana* and as we reflect on what they represent, let us try our hardest to approach our Yom Kippur prayers with as much *kavanna* as possible. Let us make our *Yom Kippur* prayers true *Avodat Halev*—a true service of the heart.