

Prayer: Poetry and Passion

The answer is prayer.

Usually when people say that what they mean is: Start praying. If you pray hard enough God will answer. If you lead a pious and religious life, your prayers will get to heaven. If you're really good enough, you could even invoke a miracle.

Which is not at all what I mean.

What I mean is that prayer is equal measure heart and head. It is where the Jewish people go when we want to think and to feel. It is private and public, deeply personal and fundamentally communal.

Prayer gets us in touch with the delights of this world that are ours to relish and grounds us in the responsibilities that are ours to uphold. In the words of author E.B. White: we are "torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world."¹ As the beauty and gravity² of our lives take our breath away over and over and over again, prayer reflects and re-shape our response.

Author Catherine Madsen argues that prayer should speak "the language of brokenheartedness, and ardor and fear."³ I'll go even further and say that if, during this High Holy Day season, we don't get in touch with brokenheartedness, and ardor, and fear, then I don't think we're doing our job.

¹ In a New York Times interview, 1969.

² An expression I borrowed from Catherine Madsen in *The Bones Reassemble: Reconstituting Liturgical Speech*.

³ Madsen, page 3.

It's not that prayer creates these emotions. Rather it gives them shape and space and expression.

As an example of brokenheartedness, consider the confessions that we will recite next week. On Yom Kippur, we will pray the *ashamnu*, an alphabetical acrostic. It starts with aleph and each word begins with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Donniel Hartman teaches that this is so because otherwise we wouldn't know where to stop. The order of the letters provides a container for our confession. Our mistakes, the injuries we have caused to those round us are, truly and regrettably, endless. *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu*...It is the equivalent of saying, "For the sins of arrogance, betrayal, cynicism..."⁴ We did it all, from A to Z. Our tradition is fierce in holding us accountable.

In fact, there is a midrash that teaches that the Messiah will not come until the tears of Esau are exhausted. This is surprising, since it is the patriarch Jacob who deceived and outmaneuvered Esau, his twin brother. It's even more surprising since Esau is the progenitor of the Edomite people, one of the archenemies of the Israelites. Our sources usually justify Jacob's trickery - Esau brought it on himself. He must have deserved it. Jacob was doing what he had to in order to make sure that good would prevail. But the midrash says - none of that matters. What matters is that back in the day, our ancestor, our Biblical hero, Jacob, was dishonest and self-absorbed. He cheated, he lied, he abandoned his brother. And while the vast majority of Jewish literature follows Jacob's story, this midrash brings to light the cries of Esau that history forgot. So too, it confronts *us* with all of the tears that we

⁴ From *Gates of Repentance*

have caused, even if we were justified, even if we had no other choice, even if, we would do the exact same thing again.⁵ We are responsible for all damage, whether it was intentional or collateral. When we don't take responsibility, when we assume the *ashamnu* is talking about someone else, we delay the Messiah. That's our tradition's way of saying we stand in the way of the progress of humanity. We stand in the way of greater harmony and peace. When we do take responsibility, when we say the *ashamnu*, we bring the world closer to redemption.

There are, of course, other categories of heartbrokenness outside of our own shortcomings. The disappointments, the regrets, the hardships, the losses - all of these surface in Jewish prayer. For example, the Zohar describes Rabbi Hiyya's response to the death of his beloved teacher, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Rabbi Hiyya is so moved by Shimon bar Yochai's teachings that he refers to him as the Holy Lamp. He can't believe that the light has gone out. He can't believe that his mentor and friend has returned to dust. And so, he turns to the ground and cries out, "Dust, dust how stubborn you are, how impudent. The Holy Lamp who has illuminated the world...decays in you."⁶ While not cast in a traditional rubric, Rabbi Hiyya's cry is a prayer. Even deeper than his heartache is outrage at nature's cold heart. Why does he speak to the dust? Maybe because it is utterly absurd that something so insignificant gets the better of his brilliant teacher, his dear friend. Maybe because he's not on speaking terms with God.

⁵ Compare to Maimonides' *Hilchot Teshuva*.

⁶ Melila Hellner-Eshed, *A River Flows from Eden: The Language of Mystical Experience in the Zohar*, page 57.

Which brings me to another point – one major barrier to prayer for many people is uncertainty about God. So I want to say this – most of the ideas about God that you want to challenge – I want to challenge them, too. Most of the teachings about God that leave you cold because they feel flimsy or superficial – they leave me cold, too. It’s true that our prayers are usually directed at God, but if your critical mind and your questioning spirit make it impossible for you to think about talking to God, that is just fine. Just don’t let that get in the way of the potential you have to be a praying person. Talk to yourself. Talk to the universe. Dedicate your thoughts to the important people in your life – those who are here or those we have lost. If God wants to, God can listen in on these conversations. Talk to your own instincts. Talk to the stars. Talk to the dust like Rabbi Hiyya did.

In the Zohar, by the way, he turns to the earth a second time and says, “Dust, dust, do not boast! For the pillars of the world will not be surrendered to you. Rabbi Shimon has *not* decayed in you.”⁷ Having railed against the world for its wrongdoings, he finds comfort in the enduring human spirit. He cannot bring his teacher back but the dust will not have the final word. The relationship lives on. One way in which prayer *works* is by reaching deep into the bottomless pit of heartbrokenness, to uncover the beginnings of healing, the beginnings of hope.

So, that’s heartache. But is there really a place for fear in prayer? I thought this sanctuary was – a sanctuary. A refuge, a place to feel safe. And indeed it is. But as is the case with our sorrows, prayer offers the chance to acknowledge and cope with what frightens us.

⁷ *Ibid.*

And here I want to talk about metaphor. Our tradition takes us to meaning and magnitude through metaphor. In various places, we read: We are like a fleeting wind, our days like a passing shadow.⁸ You, God, You roll light away from darkness and darkness from light.⁹ You spread a shelter of peace over us.¹⁰ Remember us and write us into the book of life, the book of merit, the book of compassion and forgiveness.¹¹ Let the field and all that is in it sing for joy¹². Let every tree of the forest arise in delight. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.¹³

Without metaphor, we would get up here on the High Holy Days and say, “It is really important to confront our mortality. It is healthy for us to know that we are vulnerable. Let’s spend a few minutes thinking about our fragility and how it may impact the way we live our lives.” But that’s not what we do. At every service, we stop the normal flow of our prayers and we say – *B’rosh HaShana yikateivun u’veh yom tzom kippur yechateimun, kama ya’avrun, veh chama yeebarei’un mi yekhiye umi yamut*. On Rosh HaShana it is written, on Yom Kippur it is sealed. How many shall pass on, how many shall come to be. Who shall live and who shall die. We say it in Hebrew. We say it in English. We read it. We hear it chanted.

It is an impossible question – Will I live through another year? Will my loved ones? What about my dearest, closest, most adorable, most admirable...will the rock of my life live through another year? The poetry, the rhythm and the cadence, they

⁸ Psalm 144:4

⁹ Ma’ariv Aravim

¹⁰ Hashkiveinu

¹¹ Avinu Malkeinu

¹² Psalm 96:11-12

¹³ Amos 5:24

invite us deeper into the question - *Mi yehiyeh u'mi yamut* - who shall live and who shall die? They reach right into our gut and they stir up fear.

The Jewish tradition doesn't bother with watered-down simplistic prayer. It doesn't want to waste our time. It goes straight for matters that matter. It gives us powerful language and opens up the channels of heartache, fear, joy, reverence and humility. I don't know if there is a book of merit, a book of compassion and forgiveness, a book of life. But I desperately want to be written into them.

That's metaphor. That's the paradox of not knowing what I believe about God and at the same time needing God to show up in prayer. When I talk about God, sometimes I mean all that is sacred. Sometimes I mean the internal impulse to grow, to become better. Sometimes I mean the utterly mysterious ability - we don't always have - but we *often* have to get out of bed on days when by all logical and rational standards, we should be crushed beyond recovery. Sometimes I mean the staggering beauty of another human being, the way the simple fact of their existence fills us with joy and hope. And all of that is only just the beginning of what I mean when I talk about God.

That's a lot of power packed into a 3-letter word. Power that sometimes inspires fear. Power that is certainly worthy of our reverence, our awe, our praise, our appreciation.

Which brings me to ardor, by which I mean gusto, passion, fervor, fire. I saved it for last because I think it is the hardest of the trio for us moderns. The truth is, some of my best prayer experiences have occurred in a place where I really don't like to be: the women's side of the mechitza. In traditional synagogues, I am always

torn between my distaste for being separated by gender and my *love* of the fierceness and intensity of the prayer. You sing at the top of your lungs. And it's easy because the person sitting next to you is doing the same thing and so is the next person and the next and the next. You can't even hear yourself because everyone is praying.

There was actually a time when Jewish prayer was much more spontaneous, more loose, less rote. There was prayer before there were prayer books that fixed the words and froze some of the creativity. In more recent times, a whole host of factors have led us to a certain decorum, a certain order, the notion that there is one right way to pray. Our immigrant grandparents wanted to fit in with our Protestant neighbors. American Judaism chose the intellectual over the affective. Still today, we limit ourselves with our sometimes obsessive need to make prayer a cerebral experience. There is little room in that aesthetic for Hannah, from today's Haftarah reading, who prays with such vigor that she is mistaken for drunk.

I don't know what it takes to become intoxicated with prayer. Maybe a certain make-up or a lifetime of practice. But can you imagine *fervor* in your prayer? Can you imagine it pulsing through your entire body? Can you imagine singing at the top of your lungs? It's OK if you can't. There is no one right way to pray. But I do want to invite you to put some passion into your prayer. To pray like you mean it, even if you're not sure that you do.

For some, this may be hard to think about because we're not in that shul I just described. We're not in that setting where your voice blends in because everyone is singing so loudly (unless we are....but I'll get to that in a minute). You

might be thinking, “If I join in prayer out loud – my wife, my husband, my kids, some person I don’t even know, might hear my voice. “ So, I am going to ask you right now to turn to the person next to you and repeat after me, “It’s OK with me....if you sing off key.” And I want you to turn to the person on the other side of you, look that person in the eye and say, “You too.”

Singing. It is the hard part and the best part. And there is nothing like heartfelt prayer that rises from the congregation. That sweeps over you and washes away whatever heaviness you are carrying. In fact, you might ask – how can I talk about fervor when I have just filled our prayers with discomfort and distress. Well, sometimes the *only* response to haunting heartache, the only response to daunting fear, is to sing. To sing your heart out. To sing in defiance. To sing as a sign of resistance and resilience. You will not prevail you impudent dust. I’m still here.

So, we’re going to sing. You don’t have to. You can listen. Or hum. Or tap your fingers. Or take a moment of quiet reflection. But you’re invited. Everyone is invited. We’re going to start out nice and slow. If we feel like it, we’ll pick it up. But first, let’s just let this beautiful niggun ring through the air a little bit, let it hang out. Let it take its time.

[Shiru L’Adonai Niggun]

That’s what I’m talking about. Thank you for praying with me.