

Why We Pray: A Meditation on Jewish Prayer Yom Kippur Evening 5774

I begin with a familiar story. Once there was a man who lived in a town that was often flooded by the local river. On one occasion, as the waters began to rise the authorities urged residents to evacuate. The man refused. He wanted to stay in his home. He believed that he could ride out the storm. In addition he had an unshakable faith in God. As the waters reached the steps of his home, the police came by in a rescue vehicle and urged him to join them. He refused, saying, "God will provide." The waters of course began to rise and fill the first floor of the house. Neighbors came by in a boat and again urged him to leave and travel to higher ground. He again refused saying from the second floor window, "God will rescue me." Finally the waters rose so high that the man had to retreat to the roof. A Coast Guard helicopter hovered overhead and lowered a safety harness to pull him onboard but again he refused, waving it off and muttering to himself, "God will answer my prayers and I will survive." Soon the waters covered the roof of the house and the man eventually drowned. He arrived in heaven with a soul filled with doubt. He was welcomed by God. The man blurted out, "God, why didn't you answer my prayers?" And God said, (everyone) "First I sent a car, then I sent a boat and finally I sent a helicopter."

This story—or joke—illustrates an important observation about prayer. The answers to our prayers are not always what we expect. Miracles are not as we read in the Bible and as recounted by our tradition. Sometimes we are God's instruments. Sometimes we help to fulfill other people's prayers.

I have been thinking about our prayers and the meaning of prayer. As you know we are piloting the Reform movement's forthcoming High Holiday prayerbook that we are using this evening. Part of being a Reform congregation is that our prayers and our prayerbook are renewed on a regular basis. Contemporary musings and new understandings must be added to our ancient prayers. That is part of the essence of Reform. I hope that some who are here this evening will volunteer to provide concrete feedback to the prayerbook's editors. On Rosh Hashanah we discussed our prayers for peace: Shalom Rav and Sim Shalom as well as a powerful biblical story: Hannah's prayer for a son.

In just about every way Jewish prayer runs counter to our contemporary culture. Let me lay out the conflict of prayer in the modern era. There are three ideals of Jewish prayer: 1. There are set times for our prayers. 2. There are fixed texts to recite. And 3. We say our prayers together, with others. I would like to meditate on these ideals and the conflicts they represent. To be honest I don't have all the answers sorted out, but I think it is important to raise the questions our contemporary times raise. If we are going to be committed Jews in the modern age we have to address the questions of prayer. For centuries prayer has defined us. It has bound us together. So we had better

start asking the questions and formulating at least partial responses and answers to why pray and why pray as Jews.

1. Conflict #1. There is a set time to offer our prayers. There is shacharit, minhah and maariv on a regular day. There is the morning, afternoon and evening prayers. The opening debate in the Talmud in Masechet Brachot is if you have to say the Shema in the morning, when is it too late to say the morning Shema? In other words when have you missed your opportunity, and in Jewish terms, obligation, to say the morning Shema? We have our Shabbat prayers that begin Friday evening at sunset and our holiday prayers that begin on appointed days. It would make no sense to gather for Seder in December or to light the menorah in April. Our prayers are structured around hours. That is the Jewish ideal. There are set times to say our prayers. You can't say the prayers whenever you want. You can't change the date of Rosh Hashanah, as much as we might have wanted to this year. You can't say the Shema in the afternoon. You can't light Shabbat candles on Thursday evening even if it is more convenient. That is the conflict.

We belong to a generation that gets to do whatever they want when they want to. Let me illustrate with one of my favorite pastimes—no, not cycling, but Netflix. The release of “House of Cards” and “Orange is the New Black” series is the beginning of the end of a shared, appointed hour. Don't get me wrong. I am not trying to demonize Netflix. I love it. I can watch old classics as well as recent releases whenever I want. With the advent of streaming I can watch whatever I want, whenever I want. Last year, following the High Holidays and as a release from their pressures, I watched the entire season 1 of “Prisoners of War,” the Israeli series on which Showtime's “Homeland” is based. Seasons 1 and 2 are actually on Hulu if you are interested. In three evenings I “binged” on TV. Netflix has of course capitalized on this change in our viewing habits and released their series all at once. Gone are even the days when you have to program your DVR. As I shared on Rosh Hashanah evening, sometimes I make the mistake of calling my parents between 6:30 and 7 in the evening. They always pick up the phone and say, “Steven (it is not Steve when I have made a mistake) we can't talk now, the news is on.” I want to shout, “But it's on the Internet. Check your inbox.” Who is still bound by that external clock? Rarely do I even watch “The Daily Show” at its appointed hour. I almost always watch clips the next day. But just because I can watch when I want does not mean I should watch when I want. The question for our age is what is lost when each of us just follows our own individual schedules divorced from the pulls of the world around us and then immune to the concerns of others?

Shabbat is ushered in by the setting of the sun. It is not dependent on my schedule, but instead on the rhythm of nature. When we follow God's timetable we become attuned to nature and the world rather than ourselves. The holidays remind us that there are requirements beyond my own, there are obligations that transcend my family's, there are needs beyond what I want, when I want.

2. Conflict #2. The Jewish tradition has given us a siddur filled with prayers written by generations of poets. Let's take Sim Shalom for example. Although authored during the rabbinic period nearly 2,000 years ago, the core of this prayer, the priestly blessing, harkens back to Temple days. Then the priest would conclude the sacrificial service with the words: "Yvarechecha Adonai v'yishmarecha...May the Lord bless you and keep you..." We might prefer the words of John Lennon or be more comfortable or even inspired by the words of "Imagine all the people..." but they do not span thousands of years. When we join in song, singing together the words of Sim Shalom, or Shalom Rav in the evening, we join with prior generations of Jews. It is the words that connect us. Our melodies have certainly changed, but the words remain the same. I am certain that few if any other congregations are blessed with such a rousing Adon Olam with which to conclude services. Part of the prayer's power is not just our cantor's voice or Natalie's fingers but that every synagogue throughout the world is singing these words. If we changed everything, and especially every word, we would lose that connection. With Jews throughout the world we sing the concluding verse, "Adonai li v'lo ira—The Lord is with me; I shall not fear."

The words are our link to others. The theory of any tradition is that the past is wiser, that the generations that preceded us were more spiritually aware. We rely on their words, on their wisdom. We look back to others in order to learn how to express ourselves. We read others in order to discover the words that too often escape us. Shalom, peace continues to elude us, but the words of our prayers need not do so.

The reason we hold a book in our hands when we pray is that we believe our words have weight. We belong to a tradition that values words. Herein lies the conflict. So many of us no longer read with a book in our hands or the paper spread out on the table. We have kindles and iPads. I love my kindle. I can carry hundreds of books with me. I can have my newspapers and magazines delivered to me wherever I might be. Still I tend to read more broadly when the paper is opened up on my kitchen table. Then I also read the articles next to the articles that I have turned the page to read. With these e-Readers our reading follows our pre-conceived interests. Leon Wieseltier offers this distinction between browsing and search. He suggests that our wisdom is diminished because we no longer browse. Gone are the days when we wander through a bookstore or record store. He writes: "Search corrects your knowledge, browsing corrects your ignorance. Search narrows, browsing enlarges. It does so by means of accidents, of unexpected adjacencies and improbable associations." (*TNR*, January 11, 2012) For my children their universities' beautiful libraries are primarily study halls. They are not what they were for me: places of discovery. I discovered there Abraham Joshua Heschel's *The Insecurity of Freedom*. It was near the book I was searching for by Martin Buber. On that day of discovery I sat on the floor of the stacks reading Heschel. We discover ourselves in the words of books we did not know we were looking for. If everything becomes virtual how will we learn what we do not know we need to learn?

We belong to a generation in which words are cheapened. Anyone can post anything, right or wrong, factual or not, valued or not. It is not true just because it is on the Internet. To make it to the shelves of a university's library meant that the words held meaning and conveyed certain truths. My children search on their laptops. Anyone can create a blog. (rabbimoskowitz.com) The siddur is about words that have been measured against history. They have stood for centuries. They have been recited by generations. I have long argued that the Bible and siddur are our people's Jewish survival guides. You want to know how to remain a Jew. Carry these two books with you. Read their words. Study their passages. They are the secret to our survival. But they also hold the keys to human survival. It is in books, in words measured on a page, that the spirit is restored.

What happens when words are no longer measured, when the words of prior generations are no longer valued, when our words become virtual and then ephemeral? Will our world be richer or poorer because we no longer look to the aged, to parents and grandparents for wisdom but instead to Google? The Internet might in fact be an extraordinary repository of knowledge, but wisdom is gained by years not by the accumulation of facts. That is what is held in your hands. Even though we may not be able to translate the kaddish prayer word for word, could there be any other words that could mark our grief? Could we celebrate a wedding without the words "Siman tov v'mazel tov."? Words gain poignancy and weight through the generations.

3. Conflict #3. Ours is a highly individualized and personalized culture. Judaism values the needs of the community over the individual, the prayers of the group over the single person. Prayer with one's congregation becomes the corrective to the over indulgence of inwardness. While cute, and at times adorable, is it good for us to post selfies all the time? And can someone please tell me why I need to see pictures of my friends' dinner entrees on Facebook? I am all for self-discovery and individual rights but the group is where we attain meaning, the community is where we achieve greatness. That is the Jewish view. We pray with a minyan, a quorum of ten. We recount our sins on this day of Yom Kippur using "we." It is not that everyone of us has committed the same wrong, but instead that we are strengthened by "us." And we are weakened by saying "me."

Back to Netflix and TV. It was not so long ago that we gathered to watch TV together. Now I can watch TV by myself on my laptop, again whenever I want. Community was once, and not so long ago, bonded together with weekday discussions of "Did you watch the Sopranos this weekend? That whole cell phone thing was amazing." Such a discussion seems like ancient times. Now, when asked "Did you watch 'Orange is the New Black?'" I respond with "It is in my queue." And by the time I get around to watching it, the discussion is lost and the ties that bind one to others begin to fray. With the exception of football and sports, everyone is on a different schedule. It used to be that my friends and I gathered in my basement to watch MTV (I assure you, we did nothing else) and waited with excitement for a debut music video and then later might watch Saturday Night Live. We laughed together. We critiqued the videos together.

We were bound together around that TV. Now videos are posted on Timelines and in boxed to each other rather than viewed at the same time, in the same place—together, with others. Friendships and community did appear more palpable than today's virtual, online friends. Ask any kid who goes to sleep away camp where their best friends are made and they will most likely tell you those at camp. Part of the reason why has to be because there are no iPhones and laptops at camp. You still have to talk to each other face to face. You have to work out problems by talking rather than texting. I know I have said that before, but it is worth repeating. Maybe we should limit the computer and iPhone use a little more. How can you learn the all important "we" if existence is defined by me, and my iPhone?

I am sure by now some might think that I am against change and innovation, that I don't recognize the virtues and gifts of the modern, technological age. This is not the case. I love gadgets. But the pace of change is so quick that the questions have barely kept up with the innovations. We are unprepared for Google Glass! Our children will be the most self-photographed generation in history. Our task on this day is to ask these questions, to explore the implications of where we are heading. I do not believe that rabbis should stand before you and say, "Change is bad. The future is doomed." But let's at least talk about what is changing. Our infatuation with gadgets comes at a cost. Let's ask ourselves what is worth preserving. Our humanity is not necessarily enhanced by all technologies. Existence and meaning cannot be, and must not be, defined by computers and iPhones. They are but tools. That is part of why we need prayer.

Prayer helps to lift us out of our own individual concerns and look to the needs of others, to the requirements of the community, and the welfare of the world. Still we come to synagogue with our individual requests. We want instant gratification, an immediate response, and a quick fix to what ails us. That is not Judaism's view. A certain familiarity with the rhythm of the prayers is required. There is not the expectation that a spiritual awakening will occur the first time one attends or even the second. There is not the suggestion as well that each and every time one will feel something.

The role of the shliach tzibbur, the prayer leader, is to lift our prayers. No one can of course sing like our cantor. Our prayers are carried on hers. She lifts us. Sure you can pray by yourself. Sure you can work out by yourself. But you might never finish the last mile on your own. Your prayers might never reach heaven if standing alone. In community we tend to ask for that which will benefit all. We rejoice together. We sing together. Prayer helps to restore balance and perspective. In a world that sees the individual as first and foremost we require a corrective. We need reminders to look out for others. Prayer calls us to what is truly important and lasting. It is not me. It is instead us.

On Rosh Hashanah morning we studied the story of Hannah's prayer. Hannah prayed for a child. She went to temple and poured out her soul. The Bible says: "V'hi marat

nefesh v'titpaleil al-Adonai u'vacho tivkeh—In the bitterness of her soul, she prayed before the Lord, weeping and crying.” Eli, the priest, thought she was drunk because of how she was carrying on. He scolded her. She then explained her torment. He said, “Lchi l'shalom. Go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant your request.” The Bible reports that God remembered Hannah and opened her womb and she gave birth to Samuel, the prophet, who later anoints the great kings of Israel. I had often read this story as an illustration of the biblical, and later rabbinic, paradigm: pray really hard and God will give you a miracle. But this seems remote and almost, I dare say, fantasy. Over the years I have wondered if the story is not a cruel torment for those struggling to have children. But this year I discovered that the meaning of the story is not in the apparent answer to Hannah's prayer of a son. It is instead found in the verse that immediately follows her prayer. As soon as Eli offers his words of comfort, as soon as she has poured out her pain, it is reported: “So the woman left, and she ate, and she was downcast no longer.” That is what prayer can offer. She was downcast no longer. (I Samuel 1)

Do you want to know why pray? It is because no matter the century, no matter the technological advances, prayer reminds us that the moment matters, the word has import, and the community continues to lift us. No new device will ever be able to provide what has sustained us for millennia. When we are downcast sometimes all that is required is a song and a prayer.

L'chi l'shalom. Go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant your request.

***Rabbi Steven Moskowitz
Jewish Congregation of Brookville
September 13, 2013***