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Erev Rosh Hashanah 5776: Seen and Heard

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A man is chased into a cave by a bear. With his back to the wall, as the bear is closing in, the man closes his eyes and begins to say the *shema*, thinking the end is near. He opens his eyes and sees that the bear in front of him also has *his* eyes closed and is praying. The man is overjoyed. He says to himself, "How lucky I am to have been cornered by the world's only Jewish bear! He's praying. I'm saved! But then he listens a little more closely and hears the bear saying, "*ha motzi lechem min ha'aretz* – thank you God for this meal."[1]

It's a complicated business, prayer.

Now, to pray when a bear is about to attack is one thing. But if you were to ask me: "Imagine that some strange force compels hundreds of Jews to come to synagogue for two or three days a year, what would you do with them?" In that scenario, I'm not sure I would reply: "Give them a prayerbook, and ask them to sit down and stand up and be quiet."

And yet, when we come together on these high holy days, what do we do? We pray. Words upon words upon words. I remember, as a child, counting the pages left in the machzor, and calculating what percentage was left. Others, I know, count the lights in our ceiling on these days – and, for extra distraction, count the ones that are burnt out. I alternate, on these days of awe, between feeling like I have the privilege of transmitting a beautiful and living tradition, and feeling like I am boring you to tears. Now, don't get me wrong – boredom can be good for the soul. I tried saying this to my daughters once, upon which my eleven-year old daughter Ariella, a true rabbi's kid, without missing a beat replied: "Well, I don't believe in the soul."[2]

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[1] Adapted from Rabbi Bruce Dollin, http://headenver.org/rabbidollin/kol-nidre-its-your-life-and-you-are-in-charge.

[2] All stories mentioning Ariella and Alice are shared with their permission.

That would be a sermon unto itself. For now, though, I want to take this opportunity, at the very beginning of the holiday cycle, to explore the possibilities of prayer. What do we think we are doing, with this book we hold in our hands? Why do we do it, year after year? Is this really the best way for us to spend our time?

Take a moment, and look at the book. First things first: do you notice anything different?

Some of you may have heard that a new Reform machzor was published this year. It was, and this isn't it. What we have done is taken advantage of another congregation getting the new one, to let us upgrade to the 1996 gender-sensitive version of the 1978 edition we had used before. Specifically, three of our congregants – Nigel Hare, Miranda Flaig, and their baby daughter Sadie Ella, took a road trip down to Roslyn, Long Island, and brought forty boxes of prayer books over the border for us to enjoy. By including our foremothers beside our forefathers, and not ascribing gender to God, these books simply do what we have done here for some time. Opening in the Hebrew direction instead of the English one may take getting used to for some, but that's good too. Prayer, I believe, is meant both to comfort us and make us uncomfortable, to resonate with our beliefs and our values, but also to teach us something new.

Now, please put the book down. You may have noticed in my opening story that neither man, nor the bear, is using a book. Decades ago, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel articulated the insight that the problem of prayer is never really any given book. For thousands of years, we didn't even have books. The problem of prayer is prayer.

I want to suggest, tonight, that there are three possibilities that prayer opens up for us, three approaches that can make the time we will spend on these days worthwhile: connection, expression, and transformation.

First, connection: Why does Schwartz go to synagogue? To talk to God. And why do you go to synagogue? To talk to Schwartz.

Why do we pray? We pray because it connects us. It connects us to each other (like it or not), and it connects us to those who came before. In Montreal, more than any other community I know, people come on high holy days to be with parents or grandparents, children or grandchildren, siblings, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Generations will sit where their families have sat, all in relation to each other. You know where you sit, and you know who sits two rows back. We pray because Jews before us here have prayed. We pray because Jews around the world pray. We pray because the words or the melodies or even the smell of the sanctuary moves us in some profound way. I want to ask you now to take a moment to think of a connection that draws you to prayer; the person who first brought you here, the people with whom you associate these holy days and this sacred space.

Connection is a beautiful reason to pray, but it's only partial. After all, as the first Jew, Abraham didn't have precedent; he didn't have a family pew. According to a midrash, Abraham left his cave at the tender age of three, and like a little scientist, started observing the world. First he prayed to the sun, but when it sank, he prayed to the moon. When the moon sank and the sun rose again, he realized there must be a higher God, and that was where he directed his prayer.[3]

Beyond connection, then, we find expression: that we pray because something in the act of praying lets us express something important, about who we are, and what we believe. We are not meant to check our brains, and our lives, at the door.

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[3] Genesis Rabbah 61:16 and 95:3; Midrash Tehillim 1:13.

That, of course, makes it harder. Because, after all, who walks in here knowing exactly who he is, or exactly what she believes, or whether there is room for modern thoughts in ancient words?

Before leaving for Temple's Israel trip this past spring, I offered to take notes for the *kotel*, to be placed in the Western Wall. My older daughter's grade five class, my younger daughter's pre-K class, Temple staff... all gave me notes to take. As the day of departure drew nearer, Alice, my five-year old, wanted to be sure that her note was packed. And then she said: "Mama, you have to pack an eraser."

"An eraser?" I asked, "why?" "Because," she replied, "some people might write mean notes to God, and I want you to be able to erase them."

I loved that she said that. It was sensitive, it was thoughtful, it came from a wonderful place – and I disagree with it one hundred percent.

Prayer, at its best, expresses the fullness of who we are – the good, the bad, and the ugly. Prayer is based on the premise that God is not thin-skinned. Over the course of these days, we will read pages upon pages of praise – but prayer is more varied than that. One of the oldest sources of Jewish prayer is the book of psalms, and psalms, as translator Pamela Greenberg reminds us, are intended to give voice to the full complexity of our lives. She writes:

> It is precisely the psalms' refusal to engage in theological piety – their overflowing into wild jubilance or anger or deeply wrenching despair – that allows them to resonate as perennial expressions of the human desire to stand simply and unabashedly before God... [4]
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> Our prayer always begins exactly where we are, with our particularities of pain and suffering, the particularity of our outrage.[5]

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[4] Pamela Greenberg, *The Complete Psalms: The Book of Prayer Songs in a New Translation* (New York, 2010), p.xvii.
[5] Ibid., p.xxiii.

Prayer is not meant to be pretty, it is not meant to be pious. It is not simply the recourse of the suffering, or the victory song of the triumphant, or the litany of the bored. Somewhere within the pages of this book are truths about our lives, and those truths are different every moment, every day, and certainly every year.

For many years, my own theology – my own way of understanding God, and therefore prayer – was based on the Exodus story. God, for me, was the Source of freedom, the God of possibility and of hope. This was the God of the joy of the *mi chamocha*, that moment of crossing the sea. And then, at one point this past year, I realised that there had been a shift in my belief. As I enter a new decade and a new chapter in my life, God has become for me much more the God of psalms. Greenberg's description of the full range of emotions is much more in keeping with my current experience of prayer; that "human desire to stand simply and unabashedly before God," with all the individuality and all the emotion that this brings. I have to tell you, I am so grateful that my work requires me to be here every week. Not because I'm more pious or spiritual than anybody else, but simply because I'm human, and prayer gives voice to my soul.

This, I think, is what is meant when we say "God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob." Each of our ancestors had their own relationship with God, based on who they were and where they were in life. In the Talmud, the three daily prayers – morning, afternoon, and evening – are connected with the three patriarchs.[6] If you look closely at the examples given, you see that each one, when they pray, is at a particular moment in their lives.

Abraham gets up early to pray – when? After Sodom and Gemorah have been destroyed. Just the day before, he had negotiated with God for the two cities to be spared. But the next day, when Abraham goes back to that place, he sees "the smoke of the land rising like the smoke of a kiln"[7]– it is utter desolation. Abraham stood up for justice, he tried to do the right thing, and he couldn't avert disaster. It is a moment of failure, of loss. What a moment, what a model, for prayer.

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[6] Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 26b.

[7] Genesis 19:28.

Isaac is associated with the afternoon prayer – when? When he is meditating in the field, before meeting Rebecca, who is to be his bride. Isaac, whose mother has died, whose father almost sacrificed him; what does he think about the possibility of love? We don't know what he is praying – but we do know that when Rebecca sees him, she falls off her camel. I imagine her struck by the utter vulnerability that he brings, and perhaps also by his hope. Isaac is the first person in the Torah who is said to love his spouse, who finds comfort in her after all he has lost. What courage was wrapped up in that prayer.

The evening prayer is connected with Jacob – when? When he is fleeing from family drama, running from his brother, who wants to kill him for stealing his blessing. He stops to sleep with a rock as his pillow, and God comes to him in a dream. And even after God's assurance of protection, even after Jacob recognizes that he has come to a holy place, he still has his doubts. "If God remains with me," he vows, "if I return safe... the Eternal shall be my God."[8] Jacob, like so many of us, has his dark nights of the soul; like many of us, his faith is interwoven with doubt.

Our tradition teaches us that God heard our ancestors in prayer; that prayer, like sacrifice (the *korbanot*) was a way *l'kareiv*, to come close to God. I can't promise you that God hears us. But we need only to be open to possibility: the possibility that when we pray, we are heard; the possibility that when we pray, we are seen. I read an extraordinary article by Kathryn Schultz this year, where she discusses a book on invisibility, and explores why this is a power that humans might want. When do we want to be unseen, she asks, and when do we want to be seen? She writes:

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[8] Genesis 28:20-21.

> ...none of us are wholly in charge of how visible we are, and none of us wants to be visible to everyone all the time. Nor do we want to be permanently and universally invisible, the condition of the lost and the dead. What we want, and what the fantasy of invisibility promises, is the power to control the transition. We yearn to turn invisible when we are humiliated or persecuted or following our darker angels. But when we are our best selves, experiencing our finest moments; or when we are lonely and careworn and suffering – at such times, what we want is to be seen."[9]

I ask you now to take a moment, to reflect on how you want to be heard in your prayers; to reflect on how you want to be seen.

Last but far from least, transformation. Prayer is meant to transform us. We are meant to leave this experience changed. Not the change that comes with great drama – we are not looking for grand gestures, or speaking in tongues – but the change that comes from recalibration, from realization, from reflection on who we are and who we want to become. Our challenge is to leave stronger in spirit and more determined in action, stripped of our excuses for why we aren't the people we know we could be. Tomorrow, I will speak about ways we might direct our intent; but for now, simply remember: the words on the page aren't meant to stay on the page. They are meant to enter our minds and our hearts, and to shape the work of our hands.

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[9] Kathryn Schulz, "Sight Unseen," *New Yorker*, April 13, 2015, p.78. See also Jonathan Sacks, in his introduction to the Koren siddur: "Judah HaLevi, the great eleventh-century poet, said that prayer is to the soul what food is to the body. Without prayer, something within us atrophies and dies. It is possible to have a life without prayer, just as it is possible to have a life without music, or love, or laughter, but it is a diminished thing, missing whole dimensions of experience. We need space within the soul to express our joy in being, our wonder at the universe, our hopes, our failures, our fears, our aspirations – bringing our deepest thoughts as offerings to the One who listens, and listening, in turn, to the One who calls." (xvii)

Take a moment now and ask yourself: Who do you want to be in this new year? What do you need to do so that next year, you may be in the same seat, but you will be in a different place?

Throughout the coming days, we will call out to God on the shofar. It is the most primal kind of prayer; a prayer without words, a prayer without a book. There is a beautiful teaching that the shofar blasts begin with a single sound – *tekiah* – to remind us we are born whole. Then, *shevarim* and *t'ruah* come, reminding us of all the ways we have been broken. Finally, *tekiah gedolah*, that last, long blast – the hope to be whole once again.[10] On these days, our prayers are meant to break our hearts and put them back together again; they are meant to move God from justice to mercy, and ourselves from judgment to compassion.

And now, we turn to the Avinu Malkeinu. Whatever metaphors we use – father or mother or parent, ruler or king; whatever we believe – everything or nothing, or something in between; something in us calls out to be heard. We say these words to connect to each other and those who came before; we say them to bring our own selves forward; and we say them, hoping to be renewed, praying for a world that is whole.

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[10] "One hundred times the Shofar brings this message to us: You were whole once; then you were broken; you may even have been smashed and ground to pieces. But soon you shall be whole once more." Dov Peretz Elkins, cited in a sermon by Scott Gurdin, Rosh Hashanah morning, 5771.