

## **Rosh Hashanah EVE 5774:**

### **The Beauty of Prayer and The Power of Blessings**

Shanah Tovah! As we gather here on the eve of the *Yamim Noraim*, the Days of Awe, we hope to recognize the greatness of the opportunity that lies before us. For during these days we will be granted a precious commodity -- time: time for introspection, time for being with family or friends, and perhaps, in most abundance, time for prayer. Many of us will spend a great deal of time over these next ten days engaged in prayer services and immersed in the *Mahzor* and the *Siddur*. Prayer can be a wonderful soaring event; it can be a quiet, meditative and peaceful experience. Prayer can be powerful and meaningful on so many levels. Yet, for many of us prayer is hard – for so many reasons, the art of prayer is difficult to practice, the act of prayer a challenging activity in which to participate. And so, tonight, I want usher in these Holy Days by offering you a few thoughts about prayer that I hope will help you to access the beauty of the prayer experience during these important days. For me, prayer often acts to stimulate my thoughts and stir my emotions. It gives me space for inner reflection, allows me an

opportunity for gratitude and appreciation, as well as helps me to create a deeper connection with God and understand my place in the larger universe. I hope you will use these thoughts I have gleaned from various thinkers to enhance your own prayer experiences over the course of the High Holidays so that they will be as meaningful as I know they *can* be.

To begin, I quote the great religious poet, Yehuda Halevi, who wrote this about prayer and finding God: “When I go forth to find You, I find You seeking me.” A Jewish Theological Seminary professor once taught, “We tell ourselves that there are many obstacles to prayer: “I’m not religious. I don’t know the prayers. I’d feel hypocritical. I can’t get into ritual. I’m not sure what I believe -- so how can I pray?”

Would you say, “Since I’m not Einstein, I won’t think,” or “Since I’m not Michael Jordan, I won’t move?” You are who you are, and whatever prayer may mean to you, it’s real and important to you and it’s probably the most honest thing you do.

In this rollercoaster life, people pray to connect with what is timeless. Awash in trivia, people pray to remind themselves that they are part of something important. We Jews, for example, have a blessing for everything – for sighting a rainbow or the ocean, for our food and for beginnings and endings. Saying the blessings is a reminder: *Wait, look at this. Someone gave us this world. Stop a minute in wonder.*

Those blessings were written by people who *did* stop in wonder. And if you look for it, you may find that there is a voice for you among them. You may also find that somewhere in the prayer book are your fears and your dreams – and a way to express them.

Yes, there are risks in prayer. You can feel foolish, or hypocritical, or – worse – empty. This is a conversation in which there is no certainty of response. But at the very least you put yourself in touch with who you are and what you could be. You are asking the oldest, best questions in the world: *Are You there? Do You care about me? What do You expect of me? And what do I expect of myself?* The answers may be in the asking.

Start small. Bless one moment for what it brings you. Say one ancient prayer, link yourself with continuity and eternity. Fill one silence with your end of the conversation. No one can do this for you; it belongs to you”.

Rabbi David Wolpe, one of the leading thinkers of the Conservative movement once wrote: “What is more powerful than a blessing? It is the deep spiritual directive and wish of a soul. Our sages teach us that we can recite blessings spontaneously, in whatever language we understand. We are not *confined* by the blessings in the prayer book; they are a springboard, not a straitjacket. A blessing first acknowledges God’s presence: Blessed are You. The grammar is eloquent. The second person pronoun teaches that God is right there – we only use “you” in someone’s presence. The effusion of gratitude, which is a blessing, has an object: we are indebted to the Source of all.

The *Shulchan Aruch* teaches that one should not do anything else while reciting a blessing. There is no multi-tasking a *bracha*. Before you bless, take a moment and a deep breath. Sanctity requires internal

space and a focus on the moment. To do several things at once is to give one's self to nothing. Each blessing is an offering. Each offering of the human spirit is sacred”.

And I leave you with a final thought from the famous Jewish author Isaac Bashevis Singer. He wrote: In a sermon that my grandfather, a rabbi in Poland, delivered many years ago, he asked some questions that might have sounded like heresy and blasphemy. Why does God need so much praise from those who serve Him? Is The Almighty Unsure of His own powers? ...

My grandfather gave short answers...God does not *need* praise by humans, but He knows that when we cease to praise Him, we begin to praise *one another* excessively...Those who deny God are bound to bestow all of His attributes on flesh and blood... to Kings and dictators or to systems...

How different is prayer to God, from *worldly* entreaties. . . The very essence of prayer is an alleviation of the troubled soul. The faces of those who pray express a noble humility . . . Prayer to God is often

human being's only hope and refuge from the anguish of life. I have seen a look of prayer even in the eyes of the so-called mute animals in moments of great pain. Prayer is an instinct that no logic can uproot.”

May this High Holiday season provide you with a powerful experience of prayer, when the traditional obstacles do not get in your way: prayer that allows you to focus on the larger questions, prayer that lets you look deeper into yourself, prayer that assists you in counting your blessings, prayer that expresses, and relieves, anguish and prayer that brings you peace. *Shanah Tovah Umetakah* – a Happy Healthy and Sweet New Year to all.

And now an opportunity for prayer . . . as I invite Hazzan Weisel to lead us in a Niggun.