

HHD Sermon / YK
BD

By Elements Like Prayer

I went to sleep away camp growing up. I spent my first summer at Camp Harlam at the age of nine. I spent my final summer there at the age of twenty-six. I met my wife there. I discovered I wanted to be a rabbi there. Somewhere in the midst of all of this I also discovered prayer there.

As with any camp there were a series of traditions that we held dear. Some were serious. Some were less serious. If someone accidentally said the word “announcements” while reading the announcements after a meal the entire camp would launch into a seven minute, fifteen verse song about the very word, “announcements.” Every year there was a trip to nearby Beltsville Lake.

Every year there came the final night of camp, the bridge between the world that was camp, and the world that was life at home, when we would think in the most honest of ways about what that particular summer had made us, who we now were as we prepared to encounter a new year, a Bar Mitzvah year, a graduation year maybe, perhaps a sibling leaving for college.

But of all the traditions, the one that most helped us bridge present and possible, was the tradition of Shabbat. It was a tradition to wear white on Shabbat. Friday night services were held at the famed Chapel on the Hill, an outdoor sanctuary located high above the camp, and high above the surrounding Pocono Mountains.

And it was the short walk to this Chapel on the Hill, *that walk in white*, which stands out most now. I did it with sun burnt legs. I did it on Friday nights before beginning middle school and on Friday nights before beginning rabbinic school.

I did it by the side of my closest friend as he mourned the loss of his father. Sometimes I did it with a sense of uncertainty. Sometimes as I was utterly exhausted. Sometimes with feelings of *such dire contentment*. Breathing in the air, in my own way, week after week, every Friday night, I walked.

And each week on this walk I spoke my own nine-year-old language or fifteen-year-old language, a language of raw hope and gratitude. I spoke regularly with something larger than myself, more than myself.

I now realize, all of these years later, that everything about this walk was prayer. It was genuine, without pretense, a calm and calming conversation with *me* and with something so much larger than *me*.

My feet would brush through the grass and I would silently or in a slight whisper thank God for all that I had experienced the previous week, maybe say a prayer for my family, a hope I had regarding the upcoming semester or year. I would vow to do better, to try, to learn, to grow, to continue to pray. Sometimes I would just let my shoulders down and I would listen.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines prayer as: An act of communion with God, such as in devotion, praise, or thanksgiving. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a twentieth century rabbi, in far more poetic terms, teaches that to pray is to take notice of the wonder. Prayer, he says, is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living.

Even if vaguely, I understood the idea of prayer, this need for prayer, from a young age. This walk, which was so routine, yet so extraordinary, allowed me to move literally out of one week and into the next, off of one stage and onto the next, childhood to adulthood, from the unsure to sure, from almost reaching to reaching. By the time the walk was over I always felt new.

I felt, in some inexplicable way, ready. I noticed the wonder.

Then something strange happened, something that happens to all of us. I walked away from that walk and learned the seemingly sophisticated walk of adulthood. The Poconos gave way to New York City. Somehow I grew up. And somehow, at some point, I came to distrust prayer. I grew skeptical.

As kids we can pray with all of our might. We can clench our eyes shut and pray with the force of a thousand adults, for God to help us have the perfect birthday party or soccer game or summer away at camp.

At some point, when no one was quite paying attention, we grew skeptical. All of this wishing and hoping, all of this fairytale dreaming, I came to see it as best left for childhood, like so much else of what we did at camp, all of the frantic cheering and the running around with scraped knees.

We've given up on prayer, so many of us. It's not us. It's theirs. Prayer is for Midwestern Evangelicals. Prayer is for Southern Baptists and Gospel Choirs. It's for Brooklyn Hasids and yeshiva students and for Muslims during this month of Ramadan. Prayer is for football players before Super Bowls and for faraway candle light vigils we see on CNN. Prayer is for *them*.

We believe in *ritual*, in our weekly rituals, in our morning routines, in our holiday rituals, our mealtime rituals, our exercise rituals, but prayer? We don't quite believe in it. At least not like we once believed in it.

After all, why pray when we can do? My sister lies ill on a hospital bed and you want me to pray? Israel faces another threat from Her neighbors and you want me to pray? I face the greatest exam of my young life and you want me to pray? In this instance of fear, of joy, of discontent, of worry, in this instance of such endless *surprise*, you want me to...pray?

The truth is that our tradition is a tradition of doing, of acting. It is our actions that define us ultimately, not our words. As the rabbis of the *Mishnah* teach: 'Say little. Do much.'

We're not meant to rely on miracles. On healing waters, on thunder claps from the sky, on magical cures emerging at the moment of truth. And yet there is a strain. There is a strain because we know that we are to bring to our lives, our lives as Jews, a sense of unique and individual conversation with God.

God speaks to us during our most loaded of moments, during *the* moments, during those *nisim*, the miracles, that second when she takes her first unmistakable step, their first day of school as they ride off on the bus, as he stands before you chanting his Torah portion on his Bar Mitzvah day, when they return from their first semester aglow of change and enthusiasm, the day of their wedding as they *walk* from the *chuppah* to begin their life together, the echo of that shattered glass mingling with everyone's flash bulbs and tears and pride, when a loved one silently takes our hand during their illness or you take their hand during your illness, moments of family, moments of memory, moments of beginning, *the* moments...

all of those wildly beautiful moments, those desperately painful moments, our moments, your moments, *moments*, miracles, our truly precious moments of love and togetherness.

We know God is speaking to us.

And we'd love to, just once, just maybe, whisper back, with a thank you or a question or a one-line plea or a...something. Even if we could just step beyond the work day and the driving and the shuttling around and find a way to just whisper back.

But how do we do that? How might we as modern Reform Jews pray in a manner that is at once nuanced and intellectual and traditional and personal? How do we do that?

One answer lies in the Hebrew word: *Kavanah*. The rabbis of old spoke of those prayers which are set, which we say at set times: these exact words on Sukkot, these exact words at this point in the Passover *seder*.

Then they spoke of those prayers which are not quite set, those prayers which are ours, like the words you might utter or imagine during the silent prayer or the words you might utter when the tests come back negative or the words you might utter when you get out of bed in the morning and you realize that today will be just a fraction easier than yesterday was. This is *Kavanah*: personal prayer, your own Judaic language. Your own uninterrupted line to God.

And your prayer, whatever your prayer will be, spoken or sung or silent, your prayer, in Hebrew or English, at synagogue or home, *as you walk about your way*, as you walk and you walk and you walk, like Israelites from one sacred destination to the next, your prayer is *right*. Whether it begins with *Baruch Atah Adonai...* or it begins with Dear God... or it begins with I'm Not Sure This is the Right Way to Say This... your prayer is right.

Let it out. Your *kavannah*. Bring imagination and the dream and all of your hope and need to the prayer. Bring you. Allow yourself, your adult self, to picture a world that might be. As Rabbi Nigel Savage notes, think of all of the regular perils and miracles, of daily life - illness, childbirth, failed crops, rain when we need it or when we don't - and the basic aching human desire to respond.

Your personal prayer is right and while the *siddur* might serve to guide you, you must know that your personal prayer is right. And you need not be afraid to let it out.

So whether it be the *Shema* you very quietly sing on your own at the end of the day or maybe in tucking everyone in at bedtime or the fact that you choose to just hum along to the *Vahvta* here at Friday night services or your own original prayer that you say to yourself by yourself with yourself for yourself or for your children or for their children or for your parents or for your spouse or for your health or for their health or for their strength. Your prayer is right.

And it will change you. Your prayer, your picking up the line, will change you.

Because I do not believe that we pray in order to change the world. I believe we pray in order to change ourselves, better ourselves, so that we can then change the world, better the world.

You will find that your prayer will also connect you to other prayers, a community of those who pray, those who have prayed over time. Those who have filled synagogues and camp chapels and every place in between with words that are not the words of animosity or tension, but different words.

And just as your prayers will connect you to other prayers your prayers will connect you to other prayers, other sacred words. Your prayer will bring the language of compassion into your life. Those words of mercy will remain with you throughout the day. They will seep into your hands and into your heart. They will become a part of all that you do, reminding you to slow *down*, to speak *up*, to help *out*.

I wanted to share one last anecdote. You're not going anywhere right? It's a short anecdote. It's a *midrash* actually about the Western Wall in Jerusalem. A very young child once asked his father how it is that this two thousand year old wall, this ancient relic of the great Temple, doesn't just crumble to the ground already. How does it ever remain standing?

His father answered him by explaining that it's customary for people to scribble prayers on small slips of paper and place these slips of paper into the crevices of the wall and, indeed, if you look closely there are hundreds of these pieces of paper in every crack within the wall, all along the length of the wall.

Prayers in different languages, all kinds of different handwriting, pieces of paper of different colors, prayers from today for tomorrow and from yesterday for next year. Our parents' prayers. Their parents' prayers.

The father said, the truth is that the wall is now held together by prayer.

I like that. I've been thinking about that anecdote. I've been thinking about how it is that *we hold it together*, each of us, when we're not so sure how we're holding it together.

How do we manage to keep walking?

I've been thinking about the Wall and about Jerusalem. Just about every Jew in the world right now is facing that Wall, that enduring tower of stone and paper.

It seems it brings the Jewish people together, generation after generation. It makes us whole, the Wall does. A holy whole.

We could say that each of us is that Wall. We are just like that Wall. Each of us is held together, made whole, not merely by the inner workings of our body, not merely by bone and muscle, not merely by the *architecture* as it were. We too are held together by elements that transcend, elements like memory, elements like belief, elements like courage, and lastly, maybe, at the end of a long day, at the end of a long week, at the dawn of a new year, we are held together, each of us, by elements like prayer.

Wishing a good *yunteif* to you and to your family. Amen.