

Yom Kippur PRAYER SERMON 5772

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Jeff Carron was a singer and a band leader for 25 years. An imposing man with charisma and charm, his repertoire ranged from Broadway show tunes and the songs of Frank Sinatra, to rock and roll and disco. He sang for the likes of Elizabeth Taylor and Carol Channing, and led the official band for Merv Griffin at the Beverly Hilton Hotel. Several years ago, Jeff Carron traded in his baton and microphone for rabbinical ordination -- he is now Rabbi Yossi Carron. Today, his melodies are more likely to include Lecha Dodi or the 23rd Psalm. But you will rarely find him on the bima, officiating at a wedding or at a Bar Mitzvah. His congregation is a largely unseen population in a rarified environment – the LA County Men’s Jail – where he serves as chaplain to the Jewish inmates.

He is extraordinarily gifted at this calling and enormously dedicated to a group of people most of us would just as soon discount. In just a few years, Rabbi Yossi has helped several men turn their lives around – leaving behind drugs and crime to embrace a hopeful and productive future. I was privileged to see my friend and colleague at work when he invited me to attend a monthly Shabbat service he has instituted in the jail.

After being admitted through two sets of heavy metal bars, I accompanied Yossi to the room where Shabbat would be observed. I was horrified. This was an ugly, dank, grim room, with three rows of bare metal tables, and a set of barred windows way above eye level. How would it be possible to pray or to celebrate the joy of Shabbat in such a place, I asked myself? How could my friend spend so much time in such a God-forsaken environment – I couldn’t imagine. Then Yossi brought out the flowers, and the colorful paper plates, and the napkins, and the beautiful siddurs, and the home cooked meal, and the dessert cakes and the cookies. I helped him arrange all these on the tables, just in time for about a dozen inmates to assemble for the evening’s proceedings. Those few flowers, and the smell of the non-prison issue food exuded the love and care Yossi shows for these men. As the prisoners entered one by one, he gave each and every one a big bear hug, a knowing look, a comforting word. Once they were seated, Yossi began to hum a niggun – a wordless melody. The prisoners soon joined in, eyes closed, smiles beginning to emerge on their lips. This was followed by a rousing rendition of Lecha Dodi, as Rabbi Yossi led the men through the rest of the service.

Prayers were interspersed with Rabbi Yossi’s exhortations to leave behind the life of drugs, to abandon the old harmful relationships, and to glimpse the real possibility these men have to make something more out of their lives. It was clear that everyone in that room was beyond grateful for the chance to spend this time reaching for their better selves. Yossi completed the service by laying his hands on the head of each inmate, reciting, in hushed tones, the Priestly blessing over each one of them.

The place had been transformed. We were no longer in the depressing space I had shuddered to inhabit – we were in a holy place transfigured by the kavanah – the intention -- of those in attendance. In this, the most unlikely of settings, real prayer

was occurring. And this prayer, in turn, transfigured the men, providing them with a moment of connection to the divine, a ray of hope, a bright light in this, their boxed-in world. For this moment, they were able to contemplate whom they might become if they could just believe that they were truly created *b'tzelem Elohim* – in the image of God. These men, who had given in to their *yetzer rah* – their baser instincts – for so many years, were truly reaching into the deepest recesses of their souls to find that divine spark that exists in all of us. They were different men in this setting. Even the guard assigned to this unit became a different person that evening. The guard had spent two hours with us, seemingly oblivious and unconcerned about those in attendance. While the prisoners were praying, he had been intently focused on the games offered to him by his cell phone. But all of a sudden, without any prompting, he called over one of the high security prisoners and, without a word, unlocked his manacles, allowing this young man to use his hands to eat and to pray.

What occurred in the jail that one Shabbat evening is a dramatic example of prayer's power to transform. As Morris Adler has said: "Prayer is a step on which we rise from the self we are to the self we wish to be. Prayer affirms the hope that no reality can crush; the aspiration that can never acknowledge defeat. Prayer is not an escape from duty. It is no substitute for the deed. Prayer seeks the power to do wisely, to act generously, to live helpfully. Prayer takes us beyond the self. Joining our little self to the selfhood of humanity, it gives our wishes the freedom to grow large and broad and inclusive. Our prayers are answered not when we are given what we ask, but when we are challenged to be what we can be."

The High Holy Days are the most intense time for us to challenge ourselves to be what we can be – and so we are asked to spend a great deal of time in prayer probing our thoughts and our deeds, making up a *heshbon ha-nefesh* – an accounting of our souls -- before God. We are supposed to ask ourselves such questions as: Have we been silent when we should have spoken out? Have we been selfish when we should have been responsive to the needs of others? Have we been thoughtless when we should have been sensitive? Have we pursued that which is hollow rather than reaching for that which is holy? Have we achieved our potential? Have we challenged ourselves to fulfill God's will? Have we strengthened our relationship with God? To answer these questions, we need to set aside our egos, break down our defenses, strip away our illusions, and wrestle with the very core of our being. Our prayers should quiet our souls, providing us with the space to do this crucial work. This work can only begin if we can stand in true awe of God's Creation, setting aside the petty concerns of our daily lives.

But as Reform Jews, it is often very difficult for us to really pray. We value the rational and the scientific, and prayer draws on that part of our brain that is non-rational and intuitive. Prayer is often uncomfortable because it makes us vulnerable, asking us to feel deeply, to regret, to hope, to yearn, to probe. Many Reform Jews don't know how to pray. Yes, we may read the words of our prayer books but, more often than not, we remain on an intellectual level, rather than rising to a spiritual level. It's even difficult for me, a rabbi – in fact, this sermon on prayer has been one of the most challenging for me to write.

For a very long time, I found myself arguing with the prayers, sorting out what I agreed or disagreed with, wondering why I was supposed to praise God so much when there were things that made me angry with God. Then a friend gave me the key. She said: Study is the time to argue with God, prayer is the time to praise God. That gave me permission to suspend my critique. I realized that prayer was an occasion to take time out to revel in my blessings, to experience true gratitude for what and who is in my life.

I think that the late Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel says it best: "To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain the sense of the mystery that animates all beings...Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live...Amid the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers – wiser than all alphabets – clouds that die constantly for the sake of beauty, *we* are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit greatness in nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great."

By embracing true gratitude, we cannot take anything for granted – our blessings, our abilities, our talents. Prayer, at its best, should prompt us to nurture our gifts, to fulfill our potential and, yes, to participate with God in the task of repairing the world. Now prayer is an acquired skill. We cannot suddenly be able to let go of our cares and ambitions, suddenly develop gratitude, suddenly become aware of the divine and holy in our lives. Prayer takes practice, just like any other spiritual discipline. It's difficult to come to services once in a while, and to expect the peace and tranquility Heschel describes to descend upon us. But prayer does not take any special knowledge, or status. A scholar or a rabbi does not necessarily pray any better than any other human being. In fact, the rabbis of our tradition chose a very ordinary person, a woman, to boot, as the very epitome of prayer. And it is the story of this woman that the rabbis selected for the Rosh Hashanah Haftarah, when prayer is so important.

This the story of Hannah, a barren woman who wants a child very badly. When Hannah fails to conceive, she prays. And her act of spontaneous prayer turns this ordinary woman into an extraordinary character. Here's what the text in the Book of Samuel tells us:

Hannah rose after eating and drinking at Shiloh while Eli the priest was sitting at the entrance to God's sanctuary. Her spirit was greatly pained and she prayed to God, weeping profusely. . . . As she continued praying to God, Eli watched her mouth. Now Hannah, she spoke in her heart; her lips moved, but she uttered no sound; and Eli took her for a drunkard. Eli said to her, "How long will you go on behaving like a drunkard! Put away your wine!" Then Hannah replied, saying, "No, my lord, I am a woman in anguish, and I have had neither wine nor liquor, but have been pouring my heart out before God. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking

all this time out of the greatness of my concern and out of my vexation."¹

As the poet and liturgist Marcia Falk explains, at first, this little narrative may not seem terribly remarkable: a woman mutters under her breath, a priest accuses her of drinking, the woman explains herself to him. But what is remarkable is that Hannah is the first ordinary person to stand and pray at the entrance to the holy sanctuary where high priests officiated as men offered up their sacrifices. There Hannah stood with no sacrificial offering and no priest to act as her intermediary, and prayed, in her own voice, using her own words. Hundreds of years later, when the rabbis were replacing the sacrificial offerings of Temple days with verbal communal prayer, they chose Hannah's example as the very model because she prayed from the heart.² By opening up her heart, Hannah connects to God, redirecting her perspective, achieving a certain level of serenity.

The power of prayer is expressed beautifully in a short meditation in our very own *Gates of Prayer*:

WHAT PRAYER CAN DO

Prayer cannot mend a broken bridge, rebuild a ruined city,
or bring water to parched fields. Prayer can mend a broken heart,
lift up a discouraged soul, and strengthen a weakened will. —

I would like to close with an insight by the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Jonathan Sacks. "Prayer is a ladder stretching from earth to heaven... At the end of this ascent, we stand, as it were, directly in the conscious presence of God... We then slowly make our way back to earth again – to our mundane concerns, the arena of actions and interactions within which we live. But if prayer has worked, we are not the same afterward as we were before. For we have seen, as Jacob saw, that 'Surely G-d is in this place, and I did not know it'... For... Heaven is not somewhere else, but here... if only we realized it. And we can become angels, God's agents and emissaries, if, like Jacob, we have the ability to pray and the strength to dream."

So during this High Holy Day, let us take advantage of the time and space allotted us by our tradition to really pray. Let us like Hannah, like the inmates at Yossi's Shabbat, achieve serenity, practice gratitude, envision our better selves. Ken yehi rason – may this be God's will.

¹ I Sam. 1:9–10; 12–16.

² Marcia Falk, "Reflections on Hannah's prayer," *Tikkun*, 7/1/1994.