

5 26 17 Shabbat Sermon

I want to talk a little bit tonight about prayer. Surprise, surprise. I mean, as long as I can remember, I just... I came from a family of prayers. People who prayed. If you ask my dad what his running conversation was like in the car on the way into the city every day to go to work, it was usually a conversation with the [???], with God. I grew up in a world like that. And I was a little bit like that too. If you asked me when I was much younger, who did I talk to the most, it would have been Hashem, it would have been God. On the car ride into the city, on my bicycle, in my room at night, it's kind of a running dialogue with an invisible person. That was my prayer life. And it also, of course, meant going to synagogue and praying to God in synagogue.

I think the gift that I remember the most from my father on my bar mitzvah was this little siddur that I got. This little bar mitzvah siddur, 1982. It says on the inside from my dad, Lechaim David, mazal tov, le bini hayakar, le bar mitzvah shalom, yod nisan, tav shalom, Abba. It's my little siddur. I still have it. Lots of missing pages. Siddurim prayer books are a foundational religious artifact. It is a kind of looking at the tears on prayer pages or maybe the coffee stains. Seeing the worn out edges and pages that people lingered on. This was kind of my companion in my life. Dutifully using it every morning, afternoon, and evening. Until I couldn't anymore. Until I had a crisis of faith and a crisis of prayer. Until prayer became impossible.

I don't know about you, but I had a full prayer decade where I was in a drought. Anybody ever have that? Where prayer was really difficult? As I was coming out of a certain period of my life and I had become used to praying and what prayer meant. Was it a conversation? My theology started changing. I didn't really know what it was that I believed. And maybe even more than that, I was really, really angry at God.

I went through a whole period of my life where prayer was impossible. Even talking to God, my best friend as it were, didn't work. I wasn't interested. I wasn't interested in having a conversation. I wasn't interested in understanding what prayer meant. I didn't feel authentic. How many people, like you didn't feel authentic praying. Somehow prayer felt insincere. I couldn't even imagine myself as a prayer anymore. I was like, oh, this doesn't feel right. Who am I talking to? And if I did know, do I want to talk to you? What are you saying back? I'm not interested. I'm kind of done.

I went through a whole period like that. And I don't know if that's your story. I don't know, you know, I see a lot of people here that I know for whom your story might be the story, might be exactly your story. Maybe a little bit of the details are different. Maybe you weren't an ultra-orthodox Jew living in Brooklyn with payas like me. Maybe you were Hindu or Budu or Jewdo or maybe you were something.

Who knows? You could be completely in the same story as me, but maybe you have a completely different story. Maybe your story is that you never had a problem praying and you still don't. Maybe you never prayed and you're never interested in praying. Maybe, maybe even tonight in the middle of prayers as we swayed, you wondered and caught

yourself thinking, what am I doing? Or maybe like me also, you held up your prayer book and thought, wow, I love some of it and some of it I don't really get. Maybe all of those things are true for you. Maybe the question of prayer is thorny.

So I want to talk about prayer tonight. I want to talk about thorniness of prayer. What prayer means or might mean. Some of the options are available. We have so many different options. Our tradition is literally multivocal on this issue as it is on almost every other issue. And I find it more than slightly ironic, maybe perfectly ironic, that this Friday night, this Shabbat, which is the Shabbat, that is the Shabbat before revelation at Sinai, before the revelation of Torah, of this. We're not talking about the revelation of Torah, we are talking about the revelation of tefillah. The revelation of prayer itself and what it might be if we could imagine it in a different valence, in a different way.

And I think it's significant because as my dear friend Rabbi Elie Kaunfer said once to a group of Jewish philanthropists who are trying to figure out what is the next great big thing that Judaism needs to do in order to be able to be relevant to the next generation of Jews. Because you know, maybe you are a philanthropist in the room, I don't know, I'm not putting you down, but let me say that the majority of Jewish philanthropists are concerned about what's going to happen to the next generation. And they're not alone. I'm also interested, I'm definitely concerned, concerned, excited. But Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, he was sitting in front of all of them, he said, you know, here's the next great idea, it's called Torah.

And when Elie told me that story, I said to him, Elie, I have an even bigger revelation. The next big great idea is called tefillah, prayer. So how could that be, given that so many of us open up prayer books or come to temple or have a God idea that is so difficult to get ourselves inside of? How could prayer be the next great big idea? I think that tomorrow morning's Torah portion, which is Bamidbar, which is the beginning of the fourth book of Torah, the book of Numbers, Bamidbar, in the desert. The rabbis noticed that in the first verse of tomorrow morning's reading, וידבר אדוני אל משה במדבר סיני לימור, And God spoke to Moses in the desert of Sinai saying, לימור, saying.

One of the great Hasidic rabbis taking off on some of the earlier midrashim say, did God speak or did God lymor? Did God whisper or did God speak out loud? Which one is it? Because in the verse, it says, And God spoke to Moses in the Sinai desert and then said. Two different kinds of speech utterances. Says the Meor HaShemesh, a great Hasidic commentator. He says there are two stages in speech to Moshe in tomorrow morning's Torah portion. And they roughly correspond, he says, to two different developmental stages. What he called, קדנות ראשון, גדלות ראשון, קדנות שינית וגדלות שינית. Immaturity 1, Immaturity 1, Maturity 1, Immaturity 2 and Maturity 2. He says there are stages in the evolution of our own development in the time of our life, when we begin in a certain place of immaturity. That naivety, if you will, is dispelled at a certain moment and we go into what's called גדלות ראשון. We go into maturity that is the second stage.

That kind of looks something like this. We're sitting with a group of seeker students yesterday, a group of young people at Romemu, and it was Ask the Rabbi hour. So, sitting across from some very curious and some very courageous young people at Romemu, they said, Rabbi, are the stories in the Torah true? If the person who asked that question is here, is she here? Let me see where she is. No, she's not here. Claudia is going to be very proud of

this question. I said, well, it depends on what you mean by true. It depends what you are asking the Torah's truth to correspond to. So many people lose faith because they come with factual questions, as Andy Stanley puts it, and get faith answers. They come with fact questions and they get faith answers.

You want to know how old the world is? Open Genesis 1. You want to know what God looks like? Open up the book of Ezekiel. You want to know what's true? We're going to give you faith-based answers to fact-based questions, Andy Stanley says. And of course, if you're someone who's been exposed to anything remotely critical and scientific and intellectually rigorous, you won't be happy. Because your Gatlut Rishon, your maturity now dispels your Katnut Rishon, your first naivety, I believed in you, Hashem. You were my, you know, Andy calls this, your girlfriend God, my boyfriend God. You were my best friend God. Which means nothing bad is ever supposed to happen to me, God. You can't ever disappoint me, God. You have to give me everything I need, God. You have to be the God of the Torah exactly as it says in the Torah.

We, of course, in our beautiful tradition, we have an answer to the dispelling or the disappointment that is the letting go of first naivety. We have an answer, we have an antidote to that disappointment that comes with recognizing that the stories of the Torah and the idiom and the frames and the images are there to teach us deep universal truths and not local facts. And the answer to that, of course, is second naivety. What the Maor of Hashemash calls, Katnut Sheinit, Gatnut Sheinit. Paul Ricoeur called the great Hermeneutics, he said it's second naivety, which means I now re-enter the same words, the same story, the same places, but I have a certain forgiveness. I forgive the text because the suspicion that it was trying to tell me something true in a factual universe is no longer what's there. I no longer expect the sea of reeds to split in order to prove to me that human beings have to walk through the scariest place to be free. I don't ask that story to teach me the truth.

Of course, I said all of this to her yesterday, but I'm not sure if she got everything. We allow ourselves to be Midrashic, to be seekers. The word Midrash means to seek out. We allow ourselves to seek out the deeper meaning behind the stories, behind the images, behind the immature postures and theologies that leave us bankrupt when they are proven insufficient.

More often than not, the people who sit in my office and the office of my colleagues who say that we've lost faith, that we've lost religious prayer life, they've basically killed a god. They've let go of a god image. Their theology has outgrown what their experience is, but they still don't know what it means now. Now what do I do? I don't believe in that god anymore, but I still need to pray. As Rabbi Zalman said, we are theotropic beings. We incline towards God, towards meaning, towards purpose. And now more often than not, people say, you know what, I live in a world where I come with faith-based questions and I get fact-based answers. I come with meaning and longing and it's reduced to some fact.

Here, read Sam Harris and you'll be just fine. Here, go to some synagogue where they'll give you social action to do and you say, but what about God, for God's sake? What do I do with that longing to connect, to put a face that is a face that I can relate to, not the face of my great-great-great-grandfather, but maybe the face of my beautiful beloved mother or sister, where the paucity of images that we have been given in our prayer life is so limited that when we no longer can find ourselves in the text. We say, you know what, where was that

ashram again that you went to? And where was that? Where was that? Gurumai? Love Gurumai. Exactly.

It is in the context of mature faith. It is in the context of prayer that is a response to the deep longing that we each have to connect with something greater than us. It is in the context of this little siddur that could. And the words in the siddur, whose elasticity is such that it awaits a brilliant mind like Rabbi Jill Hammer, or my teacher, Rabbi Shalom, Rabbi Zalman Shachar Shalomi, or the brilliance of the Zohar HaKadosh, and teachers like Malila and others, who go back into the text and do Jewish yoga on the text. That is the original Jewish yoga, is to take a word and have it touch its own toes. Jewish yoga, Jewish prayer life is rooted in our ability to go back to the same story and read it again with the same words, but with a different interpretation, a different drashah, a different seeking out of meaning.

Where now Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh is not the old man in the sky, but being itself. When I say blessed are you, I am attaching myself to the fountain of all blessing, and who wouldn't want to do that? When I say the Shema, I am uniting the masculine and feminine in the world and in myself.

And we have a great big idea in Judaism, and it is called prayer. And it is the antidote to so much of what we get caught in. And so here it is everybody, here's the good news tonight. There's a way into prayer for every single person. The great Kabbalist, the Ari said that there are 12 gates in heaven, and that each tribe had its own gate where prayer went. Each tribe had its own siddur, its own prayer book, its own language and gestures of longing. So there's one for everyone. There's prayer that isn't personal, that is affirmative or contemplative. There is prayer like Mary Oliver's prayer, where she writes, it doesn't have to be the blue iris, it could be weeds in a vacant lot, or a few small stones, just pay attention. Then patch a few words together. Don't try to make them elaborate.

This isn't a contest, but a doorway into thanks, and a silence in which another voice may speak. A silence into which another voice may speak, that might be your prayer life. How do I find enough silence in my life so I can hear the voice of Spirit in me? That might be your prayer life. Your prayer life might be watching your breath. The new Hasidism of the 21st century, mindfulness. Your prayer life might be singing. Your prayer life might be this new siddur, which God forbid if we're not careful, also might become something that we venerate instead of use appropriately. Even this great siddur is just a means towards that end of paying attention and being able to be silent enough to hear the voice of another speaking to us, whatever that voice is. And so I tell you tonight humbly, that for a good decade, I didn't utter a single prayer other than the words, I won't speak to you God, not until you apologize.

For a full decade, I turned off this spigot in my heart that wanted so badly just to sing and to thank and to rejoice and to pray. And then it got turned on again by someone named Reb Zalman Shachar Shalomi. And Reb Zalman said this, Reb Zalman said that the prayer book is freeze dried longing. Freeze dried longing. And that we bring our yearnings, we bring our heart, we bring our intention, our passion to these words and they come to life. They come to life.

Prayer is the most natural state that we have. So what would it look like everybody? What would it look like if a community was on fire for prayer? I think it might look like tonight. What would it look like in your life if you or me or all of us found five minutes a day to pray in our own way? What would it look like if we committed that in communities that we belong to, prayer would be at the center of that community's life? That we would walk and talk for the sake of passionate, ecstatic, contemplative, alive, second naivete prayer.

So I want to leave you all with this tonight on this inaugural evening of our Siddur. A Siddur that was born in the vision of our dear Larry Schwartz and this committed team. There is almost no part of the tradition that cannot be read in a way that will nourish you. There is almost no part of the tradition that cannot be read in a way that will nourish your soul and your soul's growth and make the world a more loving and compassionate place to be. And the job that each and every one of us has is not only to read the Siddur with forgiveness and with love, but to read our lives in that way too and the rest of the tradition in that way. How can we allow ourselves to go back to old places and see them with fresh eyes? How can we go back to those practices and reinvigorate them?

On this Shabbat that is before Shavuot, we stand together as a community to receive the revelation of prayer and to enact it as best we can to bring about a better world, a more loving place, a more compassionate universe. May that be so. May it come soon for all of us and we say amen.

Please rise.