

Pray

“CONFESSION:”

When you try to write a structured sermon on prayer it doesn't work! I struggled to do so. I tried... I really did! But prayer is not intellect. It is not structure and construction or mechanics. Though there are aspects of infrastructure in the praise, petition and thanksgivings of our prayer-books. They anchor us to tradition, religion, our inherited past. But all of that is just words on a page, not the prayer.

Prayer is beyond words. It is relationship. It is metaphor. It is suspension of belief or an attempt to suspend belief. It is playing. It is feeling with heart and soul. It is setting free the spirit. It is soaring to the heavens above and through the earth below. It is touching... ourselves and that which is inside of us, and that which is beyond each of us.

So struggle with me this evening. How do we get there -- To that *Maqom*, that place of prayer? How do we fly? How do we make prayer -- so hard, so difficult -- on this most powerful of days, and in our days and years ahead -- work?

Some meditations... some thoughts. Some stories... some words. Some silences... to get us thinking about that prayer-----place:

“BIRDSONG:”

A King inherits a cage -- a beautiful golden aviary of intricate lattice. It is filled with the gentle flourish of exotic and romantic birds. They are gathered from all around the world: Persia to India, from Africa to Polynesia, from Japan to France. The cage is filled with flight-full and flight-less gold feathers; azure feathers; cerise feathers; auburn feathers; black feathers; white feathers. Peck and flutter! Brush and flash! Wisps of wings color in the dance of flight! What a sight!

Sight; but no sound -- Not a chirp heard. Not a whistle aired. Not a squawk. Not a squeal. Where is the birdsong?

The King calls out to the wise men and women of realms. They visit and ponder. They look and consider. They poke and they prod. They consult their books and tomes. But still in the aviary of intricate lattice -- filled with the gentle flourish of exotic and romantic birds -- not a sound!

The King beckons the magicians of the kingdoms. They visit and ponder. They look and consider. They poke and they prod. They cast spells of magic decorated by puffs of smoke and fragranced air. But still in the aviary of intricate lattice -- filled with the gentle flourish of exotic and romantic birds -- not a sound!

The King consults the warlocks and witches, the mistresses of herbs and the masters of potions. They visit and ponder. They look and consider. They poke and they prod. They mix and mingle all sorts of plants and essences. But still in the aviary of intricate lattice -- filled with the gentle flourish of exotic and romantic birds -- not a sound!

Finally, a soft spoken rabbi encountered the King; perplexed and bewildered by his silent aviary of intricate lattice -- filled with the gentle wave of exotic and romantic birds -- not a sound. "If you want your birds to sing," Reb Zusya suggests, "then you must set your birds free."

Accordingly, skeptically, the King gingerly lifts just one bird out on his arm, and prods it into the air for flight... a chirp.

A little more daring, the king lets forth a few more birds from the gilded cage, a few whistles into the air, melody catching the breeze.

Finally, the king delighted by the music of several, lets go! lets go! opens up the cage... and into the sky a flock of colors, a spread of wings, and the sweet music of bird-song floats higher-and-higher into the breeze.

Let's start by letting go.

The words of our prayer book can bind us, tie us down. We get stuck in the meanings of phrases that do not resonate; of beliefs that are not ours; of theologies that chafe; of Hebrew that alienates; of a melody unfamiliar. And we might feel that this prayer thing is a burdensome tradition, and we sit in our chairs, yearning to soar, yearning to be anywhere but in the synagogue seats that tie us to this Temple. How about that football game? Or that series we are missing tonight on TV? Or hanging out with our friends?

We are Elizabeth Gilbert of *Eat Pray Love*, stuck in the meditation hall at the Ashram, wanting to connect, but our mind wanders, into distracting internal conversation, that drives us only further from the notion of prayer. Some of us are here because of need or obligation. We are here because of the demand of parents. Or the pull of a grandparent's memory that tells

us this is where we need to be. Or because we are told it is decided this day who should live, and who should die.

I know some of you are here with **no prayer mojo** -- only prayer woe! Our prayer is bruised and broken and we do not know how to even start to make it soar to the heavens. How do we let go? How do we find our birdsong?

“APPLE TREES:”

Image One. A congregant taught in a Miami Torah Study: The Tree of Knowledge planted in Eden was an Apple Tree. When Eve and Adam shared of it fruit, they ate not just the flesh, but they consumed the seeds.

Planted in each one of us are those pits of knowledge, waiting to sprout, providing us flashes, glimpses of what might be... how life, meaning, prayer, might work. The know-how is implanted within each one of us.

Image Two. From horticulture: When an apple tree is bruised of limb it can be made to regenerate. The damaged branch is covered with soil. Buried and replanted it sprouts suckers and roots again, regenerating, becoming anew.

When prayer is a contusion in our heart, a damage in our soul, when it does not work, we have the ability to regenerate it for ourselves. But we must plant the bruised limb, cover it with soil, nurture its being, and allow for a process of renewal, of regrowth. In ancient Hebrew there is a term for this revival – *l’hivarich ilan* – to bring down blessing upon the tree. Can our damaged prayer ability be replanted to bring down blessings upon us? Can our wounds form new blessings, new prayer?

Image Three. An observation from colleague and friend, Rabbi Dov Taylor, of an apple orchard, near his home in Woodstock NY. So beautiful a vision! The original apple tree sits at the top of the hill. And down the slope, suckers have grown. As each descends the hill, it gives arise to another new generation of apple trees, each one sprouting yet another generation. Seven generations of trees coming down from the original. Each new generation of apple tree’s fruit morphs, slightly different, in taste, texture, appearance, but they are connected to the source, that original apple tree.

Our prayers have descended from generation to generation. They are embedded in the structure and rubric of the past (we need to learn it, we need to understand it, we need to internalize it). But for prayer to work, for each new generation there must be a re-germination, a re-generation, for the next resonant cohort of prayer to take root.

My teacher, friend, mentor and provocateur Rabbi Mitch Chefitz asks an essential question: After we are rooted in the tradition... What would it look like if we prayed naked? If we took away our prayer-books? What would rise from our *neshama*, our hearts?

“FOREST RITUAL:”

The Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Good Name, was the beloved founder of Chasidism. He loved his people with all his heart. Whenever he sensed that the people were in danger, he would head off to a secret place in the woods, light a special fire in a particular way, say a magical prayer, and the danger – whatever it was – would be thwarted.

When the Baal Shem Tov passed on to the next world, his disciple, the Maggid of Mezritch, the Storyteller of Mezritch, led the people. He loved his people with all his heart. When he sensed that they faced danger, he would go to that secret place in the woods. “God,” he would say... “I do not know how to lay out the fire, but I know the special prayer. Please let my offering to you be enough, please save my people.” And the danger would be averted.

People do not live forever. The Storyteller died, and a new leader of the Hasidim rose, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sassov. He loved his people with all his heart. When danger would arise for them, he would go to the place in the forest and have a conversation with God: “Alas, I have no clue how to lay out the fire, and I no longer know the words to that special prayer. But here I am at the special place in the forest. Please God, save my people”. And the people were saved.

When Rabbi Moshe passed, the next generation was led by Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn. He loved his people with all his heart. When he learned that the people were in danger, he did not even leave his armchair. He slumped. He shrugged. He lowered his head. He earnestly requested: “Dear God, I don’t know from the special fire. I don’t know from the special prayer. I don’t know even of the place in the forest. All I know is the story. All I have is what is in my heart. Please let it be good enough.”

And it was.

It is more than enough when we pray from our heart. When we leave the structure of where to go, what to do, what to say behind -- When we reach beyond ourselves, prayer can work!

So also teaches Elizabeth Gilbert in *Eat Pray Love*. There is a central but difficult meditation called *kundalini shakti*, which has her break out into a sweat and has her running from the meditative experience. She constantly wrestles with its form and the effect it has in making her dwell upon every demon within. She decides one morning, rather than running away from its power, to dedicate its recitation to her nephew, a restless child, who has trouble sleeping. Elizabeth lets go of her needs. And in her care and love for her nephew, in her connection to him, the prayer clicks, and becomes efficacious...

“All I have is what is in my heart. Please let it be good enough.”

And it was.

“THE ASHRAM:”

Elizabeth Gilbert’s last assignment at the Ashram is to be the key hostess for individuals who are visiting the Temple for a ten-day silent retreat. Finally as she sits watching over the spiritual endeavors of her charges... IT happens... what she has come to India for... the pursuit of her devotion. She writes... “I am suddenly transported through the portal of the universe and taken to the center of God’s palm... I stepped through time and I entered the void. I was inside the void, but I also was the void, all at the same time... The void was God, which means I was inside God... I was both a tiny piece of the universe and exactly the same size as the universe... It wasn’t hallucinogenic, what I was feeling. It was the most basic of events. It was heaven, yes. It was the deepest love I have experienced, beyond anything I could have previously imagined, but it wasn’t euphoric. It wasn’t exciting... It was just obvious. “So this is God,” I thought. “Congratulations to meet you.”

But as soon as she became conscious of this profound prayer experience, that’s when she tumbled out of it. As soon as she said “I want to hold onto this experience forever”, those two words “I want” slid her back down onto the earth. At the moment of realization, God let her go with a

“last, compassionate unspoken message: “You may return here once you have fully come to understand that you are always here.””

“OUR SHUL:”

For prayer to work for us, we must fully immerse ourselves in the power of NOW. Here in the Synagogue, here in this Temple. This moment. This Kol Nidre.

Our Machzor, our prayerbooks are jumping off points, roots meant for wings. Let their words wash over us. Let this time be that beginning of a renewed heart practice, rooted in Jewish tradition, bruised but replanted and given wings to fly.

So I ask for you to let go of words and experiences that block you. Let the difficulties wash over you. Let them become part of the now – and then just let them go. Let there be only this moment, if you can. Listen from a different place. And you may suddenly find yourself transported, to the center of God’s palm. Congratulations to meet you!

“FRUSTRATION:”

All this is not easy. And now my words to you tonight come back to structure. I have to come to a conclusion, form requires it! How does one end some meditations... some thoughts? Some stories... some words? Some silences... to keep us thinking about that prayer----- place?

One Hebrew name for God is HaMaqom. Literally “the Place.” Struggle with me this evening and tomorrow; struggle with us this year; struggle with your Jewish people – Just as Elizabeth Gilbert journeyed though India pursuing devotion, join Beth Chaverim in our journey as a community, by spending time with us at services, practicing prayer.

How do we make prayer, so hard, so difficult, on this most powerful of days and in our days ahead – work? Let’s journey! From here to there to here -- To *HaMaqom*, that place of prayer.