



Meaningful Sermons

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*"Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart"*

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Wings to Fly

ABSTRACT

Sometimes life can seem unbearable. Today, my heart goes out to each and every battling soul. At the same time I want to assure you that, as difficult as life can be, we have powers that we may be unaware of which can bring us to great heights. The High Holidays give us tools to transcend our troubles, so we can return to everyday life with new-found strength and resources.

We all have wings to fly, but we often don't know how to use them. To learn how, we must find a new way of understanding prayer. Prayer gives us wings to fly heavenward. So consider this sermon a simulated flying lesson.

Unfortunately, for most of us prayer is not a vehicle of flight but an albatross. Prayer has been burdened with dogma and ritual. It has been institutionalized and bureaucratized, so that it is something we feel we *must* do, rather than something we *yearn* to do. How do we change this? By imbuing the words of prayer with our heartfelt intentions.

The sages tell us that the words of prayer without intention are like a body without a soul, which – in stronger terms – is called a corpse. Then, not only does our prayer not have wings, not only doesn't it soar, but it is dead. So ultimately, the intentions of the heart matter most.

THE SECRET POWER OF PRAYER

1. Facing Challenges

Shana Tova!

Sometimes life can seem unbearable. Over the past year, many of you gathered here have shared with me your struggles and challenges – personal, relationship-oriented, economic and emotional. My heart goes out to each one of you today and to every battling soul. At the same time I want to assure you that, as difficult as life can be, we have powers that we may be unaware of which can bring us to great heights. The High Holidays give us tools to transcend our troubles, so we can return to everyday life with newfound strength and resources.

2. A Dove and a Cat

A story is told about a dove and a cat. Each day the dove was pursued by the cat, and each day she had to run as fast as her little feet would carry her, just barely escaping with her life. One day though, the cat cornered her, and the poor dove met her end. When she arrived at the pearly gates, she bitterly complained to God: “I stood no chance.” God felt sorry for the poor dove, and so He sent her down to earth again, but this time armed with a pair of wings. The dove was very happy and could not wait to try out her new equipment. Sure enough, very soon the cat appeared, and the dove took off at a run. But she found the wings did not help – they only weighted her down. Back at the pearly gates she was spitting mad: “These wings You gave me were good for nothing!” Said God: “Silly dove, I gave you the wings so you could fly.”

We, too, have wings to fly but most of us don’t know it.

Our wings are words of prayer, but we relate to them like burdens we must carry. We think of prayer as an activity reserved for the pious people, whom we privately think of as having no life – certainly, they are not people like us. Most of us relate to prayers of the High Holidays as nothing that uplifts, but as everything that disappoints and – worst of

all – as irrelevant. Even traditional Jews who are well-versed in the meanings of prayer and fluent in Hebrew complain about this.

While these complaints have some legitimacy, there *are* people who do manage to immerse in the holiday experience, excavate its treasures and emerge transformed and uplifted. They know how to use the wings of prayer to fly.

So it seems this is a good time to address the topic of prayer. Consider this sermon a simulated flying lesson.

3. What is Prayer?

Let's begin by upsetting some long held assumptions, by turning the definition of prayer on its end. Prayer as defined in the average English dictionary is a word originating from Old French, which is, in turn, based on Latin. This word is *preiere* – meaning “supplication” or “entreaty.” It calls to mind people down on their knees begging for mercy.

That is not how Jews pray, and there is a reason for it.

The Hebrew word for prayer is *tefillah*, and it has nothing to do with begging. *Tefillah* means something completely different. *Tefillah* shares its root with the word *toifel* which means to “unite, combine, connect.” The Jewish idea of prayer is a tool for binding two things together.

What are we binding? We are binding ourselves to something beyond us. By so doing we create an open channel for the descent of divine blessings into our lives.

So now let me ask you: “Can you bond emotionally with something outside of yourself?” Of course, you know you can. And I would bet that most of you think that bonding with something transcendental sounds very appealing.

Imagine yourself in a beautiful place – perhaps on a riverbank, or ocean front, or mountaintop, or deep in dense woods – and imagine feeling awestruck by the wonder of your surroundings. Imagine feeling at one

with the universe. If you *have had* such an experience, would you not want to repeat it? If you *have not* had such an experience, would you not want to live it?

Well, that is the experience of true prayer – nothing more and nothing less.

4. A Sad Situation

Unfortunately, that is an experience we have been deprived of. Prayer has been buried in religious dogma and rituals. It has been institutionalized and bureaucratized, so that it is something we feel we *must* do, rather than something we *yearn* to do.

I'll never forget the story I heard about the famous philanthropist, Edgar Bronfman Sr., the chairman of Seagrams. When he was a young boy, his father would take him along to the synagogue. His father was fluent in Hebrew and would read the prayers well. One day he asked his father to explain their meaning. His father responded bluntly, "I don't know what they mean, and no one else does either."

Edgar said he left the synagogue, never to return for over 40 years. And when he did return, he decided to dedicate his life – and a great deal of his fortune – to helping others, especially children, not to ever be turned-off like that.

Prayer was the thing that turned him off, because it was done mechanically and by rote.

5. A Freeing Experience

But the truth is that prayer is one of the most beautiful and freeing experiences – it is the ability to transcend yourself, to be awestruck by the grandeur of all existence, by the majesty of God, and to yearn to connect with something beyond this mundane world. When we tap into the power of prayer, we are able to generate the same feeling as that awesome experience of nature I referred to earlier.

When the Baal Shem Tov founded the Hassidic Movement in the 18th century, he was seeking to show simple Jews – the Jews who were left out of the loop in his day – how to have this experience. And he recommended praying in the fields or woods. Indeed, prayer is often associated with the fields. As a matter of fact, the Book of Genesis says that “Isaac went out to meditate in the fields...”¹

Traditionally, many Kabbalists and mystics would welcome the onset of Shabbat by going out into the fields, because there’s something about nature that helps us to bond with what is greater than us.

But before you all run out of here and head for the nearest state park, let me tell you that while nature is helpful, it is not mandatory. Because God is everywhere. And we can connect with Him just as readily in communion with others. Indeed, our collective effort gives power to each individual’s effort, so that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts. And that is why we pray together on the High Holidays.

6. Tapping into Transcendence

Now, how do we tap into the transcendent prayer experience?

First, we have to understand clearly why we pray – that we are aiming to connect with something beyond ourselves. And, we have to have a deep desire in our heart to access that connection via “the service of the heart” as the Talmud describes prayer.

Next, we must create the space within ourselves for that connection to happen. Indeed, the masters of prayer spent hours preparing themselves before they even began to pray in order to create within themselves that kind of space. There are many activities that one can just jump into, but prayer isn’t one of them. When we want to emotionally bond with something beyond ourselves, we need to open up and that takes some effort.

Close your eyes, and spend a moment in deep silence clearing your mind. Listen to the haunting melodies of the service, and let them

¹ Genesis 24:63.

penetrate your heart. That will help create the space.

And finally, you need to understand the structure of the prayer, for what good is space, if you don't know how to fill it.

7. Structure of Prayer

The structure of prayer is compared to Jacob's ladder. The Book of Genesis relates that Jacob fell asleep on a rock and had a famous dream. He dreamt of "a ladder standing on the ground with the top reaching toward heaven."²

The Zohar – the chief text of Kabbalah – explains that the ladder represents prayer. When we build this ladder, we are able to climb beyond ourselves to a place of transcendence. This ladder, the Zohar says, has four rungs:

Rung number one is acknowledging God's presence in our lives. This is no different than opening a conversation with another human being. You would not launch into a request without some kind of acknowledgment of the person standing before you. You wouldn't say, "Can I borrow a thousand dollars?" without first saying "Hi Sam. How are you?" Traditionally, the acknowledgment of God's presence consists of the morning blessings (*Birchot HaShachar*).

Rung two is praising the grandeur of God's creation. You'd do something similar with Sam. You'd say "Sam, you have been a great friend to me over the years. And I cannot say enough about your innate sense of generosity. This is why I come to you now..." Right? If words do not fail us when praising the good characteristics of our friend, how much more should we be able to say about our Creator. And we do not have to rack our brains for the right words. The psalms (*Pesukei DeZimra*), which praise the beauty of nature and God's greatness, do this for us.

Rung three is a declaration of the oneness of God and our love for Him. This, of course, means reciting the *Shema*, the declaration of God's unity in the universe, as we say "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord

² Genesis 28:12-13.

is one.” And the verses that follow: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your might.”

Finally, rung number four is creating the channel for the descent of divine blessings. This means the *Shemonah Esreh* (“Eighteen Blessings”) also known as the *Amidah* (“Standing Prayer”) for here is when we know before Whom we stand.

These are the four rungs of the ladder that we climb from earth to heaven, from absorption in the material to absorption in the spiritual. From being stuck in the mud of life to flying on wings of prayer into transcendence. This is the basic structure.

8. A Musical Analogy

Now I have two additional things to say about structure: it is the most important and it is the least important. That must sound like I am contradicting myself. So let me explain using a musical analogy.

Prayer is the music of our souls – indeed, this is why King David sang when he prayed, and why in the Temple there was an orchestra and a choir of Levites. When we pray, we each play our unique music. Now we all well know that music has a tonal structure. Every piece of music – from classical to jazz to rock – is composed using the musical scale, made up of full tones, semi tones and micro tones. That’s it. Everyone, everywhere in the world is playing music using the same musical scale, even though their efforts may come out sounding quite different. So there is basic structure to music. There are parameters. Yet, we know that music has an infinite number of combinations.

Of course, when you are learning to play, you don’t start out improvising. You learn certain methods and techniques developed by masters of the past.

The same is true with prayer. Jewish traditional prayers definitely have a structure. This structure was composed by the masters of the past – the sages – and it is made up of words which are like the tones in the musical scale. When we imbue these words with our feelings, our

intentions, and the yearnings of our soul, we make make our music unique.

Just as a musician will never play the same piece of music the same way twice, so too, we cannot recite the same prayer twice, because we feel differently each day and our life situation is never exactly the same.

If the playing or the praying gets mechanical, it fails to soar. But great things happen when we take the structure and use our individual contribution to go beyond the structure.

Now I do not mean to suggest we can abandon structure. Structure is very important, and those of us who have no structure at all usually make mistakes and take the long way around and get lost instead of taking a shortcut. But, as I said earlier, the structure is also the least important in the scheme of things.

What is more important? Intention.

9. Heartfelt Intention

The sages tell us that the words of prayer without intention are like a body without a soul, which – in stronger terms – is called a corpse. Then, not only does our prayer not have wings, not only doesn't it soar, but it is dead. So ultimately, the intentions of the heart matter most.

There is a famous story told about the Baal Shem Tov. Now I acknowledge that these Baal Shem Tov stories tend to have a folkloric quality to them, but they do communicate deep truths. So it is with this one.

A poor farmer came to the Baal Shem Tov for advice on prayer. And in getting to know him, the great Hassidic Master discovered that the man simply recited the prayer-book cover to cover, knowing nothing about anything. He knew how to read Hebrew, and he read it all without understanding a word, but he did so fervently with tears in his eyes.

The Baal Shem Tov explained to this poor farmer the proper way to pray and the structure of prayer, using bits of straw to mark the right places. Satisfied that the man would do better from now on, the great Hassidic

Master went on his merry way. But, no sooner had the Baal Shem Tov departed that the farmer dropped the prayer-book, and all the bits of straw fell out. He was lost again.

Having no other recourse, he took off after the Baal Shem Tov, who had gone quite far by then and had just reached a deep river. Being who he was, the Baal Shem Tov recited some holy words, waved a handkerchief and proceeded to walk on water to the other side.

As I said, these stories have a folkloric element to them, but bear with me, the punch-line is coming.

Not deterred, the farmer also waved his handkerchief, crossed the river and finally caught up to him. He explained what had happened, begging the Baal Shem Tov to again mark his prayer-book. "Wait a minute," said the Baal Shem Tov. "How did you catch up to me? How did you ford that deep river?" The poor farmer answered with wide-eyed innocence: "I saw what you did, and I did the same." The Baal Shem Tov said to him, "If you could do that, you don't need any advice on prayer from me." He understood that the intentions of the poor farmer's heart surpassed any structure or content of the words in the prayer-book.

Now, as we prepare to pray, I wish you all the sincerity of heart to pray like that poor farmer and walk out of here – not to be able to walk on water – but to be able to surmount the challenges of the coming year with ease, and to create of your prayers a channel of divine blessings flowing down without end. Amen.