

## Second Day Rosh Hashanah

October 1, 2008

### Personal Prayer, Public Worship: It is OR...Is it AND

Let's talk about prayer. We've been "doing it" for the past night and day, and I want us to have an opportunity to reflect on this practice I believe is essential to our Jewish lives. In particular, I have studied much in the past few years about the tension between personal, meaningful prayer and communal, obligatory worship. Honestly, in studying with a group of you during last year's Beit Midrash, I came to understand how many of you felt you did yearn for a continuing relationship with God, that you did find time for quiet meditation, silent walks, even inner dialogue with the Holy One of Blessing. But, the public worship experience felt like a distant world apart – even in our loving Beth El community.

While last year I tried to guide the conversation toward analyzing the seeming chasm between personal and public prayer, this year I find myself practicing on an almost daily basis, the connection between my quiet inner voice and the tumult and routine of public prayer.

Before I offer my own reflections on the inner and outer prayer experience, I want you to bring you inside the conversation with a short chevruta opportunity:

In her wonderful study book, **A Praying Congregation**, Jane E. Vennard suggests that the earliest memories of our prayer lives can form a road into our adult relationship with prayer, offering a reconnection to the vitality, hope, and perhaps even awe and secret wonder once evoked. Consider quietly for a few moments and then share with a partner: How did you learn about prayer? Learn to pray? Who taught you? Try and think back to early memories of learning to pray and share one or two of those memories with a partner.

(5 minutes)

I thank you for your honesty and openness in sharing your stories. My hope is that this exercise will bring all of us closer to the power of prayer in our lives. Let me now share some personal prayer reflections with you.

My stepfather, Sidney Zimbalist, died on April 1. He was a wonderful human being – a teacher, life-long learner, and excellent listener. When I felt so lost and so afraid after 9-11, an afternoon phone conversation with him gave me a grounding of trust and hope that I was sure had been lost. He lived with an abiding faith in the goodness of humanity and its wisdom to return to paths of justice and compassion.

We all die, and Sidney lived 85 pretty excellent years, and endured only 6 weeks of suffering and helplessness in his final days. The balance was to the right and to the good. And, ironic as it seems, it was in the response to his death that I found both new questions and new inspiration toward understanding the role of God and prayer in my life.

The need to hold to his memory – and more than that, to honor it in some way,

was strong. So, Arnie and I agreed on a plan... our agreement was to share the responsibility of saying kaddish for Sidney throughout this first year. While Jewish tradition offers little help in placing step-parents in their proper line of kaddish obligation, we decided to take on this commitment and would make sure that not more than a day would go by without one of us saying kaddish in his memory.

And so we began. Arnie had a built-in system within his Schechter community, as they davened daily at his school, and he would definitely be able to join them at least twice a week. I had Shabbat at Beth El, but other than that, had only my personal morning ritual to guide me with this new obligation.

You see, (probably since our last conversation from this bimah about personal relationship with God), I have been working, now for a few years to practice talking to God, within the context of personal prayer. I have set for myself a very short daily practice as soon as I awake each day. The prayers of the tradition continue as important guidelines, and I do, each day, add in a prayer of healing- with no pre-set text, no melody, and only the clarity that I will talk to God for a minute and ask for what I truly want: a return to health and fullness of life and vigor for specific people I hold in my heart. This textless conversation each morning has been my road into that personal, intimate crying out to God that has seemed so difficult for me. We are taught: "make your ultimate concerns your deepest desire - that is prayer for you." This is what I try.

**So, I wondered this spring, "How would this kaddish obligation affect this**

**personal ritual?** “ On one hand, I had slowly begun to feel more responsible, more empowered, and, frankly less fearful of opening a quiet mouth to Godliness. But, now as I felt tremendously saddened, the immediacy of not being able to call out Sidney’s name any longer was physically painful. What would become of my conversation now? So, bucking tradition and the lack of 9 others in my bedroom for the necessary minyan, I began to add the kaddish to my morning prayers. I created a minyan in my mind and stood quietly, reciting each word in rhythm, picturing Sidney in my mind and calling out his name as I dedicated these words to his memory.

When leaving aside the inner questions of whether I was saying the “right” prayers, “enough” prayers, this morning ritual became both routine and deeply meaningful in a new way. The mix of gratitude – a simple “Thank you God, for this”; asking for peace and health; and bringing forth the loving feel of my stepfather’s kindness and presence – combined to set me forth with an awakened spirit on many days.

**I believe all these things about prayer: it is a manifestation of being in God’s presence; a connection with inner strength and affirmation; a request for guidance, blessing; a yearning to be heard; a conversation that brings one closer to becoming who we are truly meant to be in this world.**

But, this new kaddish obligation brought forth other beliefs about prayer that I had been neglecting: a connection to and investment in the world around us and the positive power of obligation. So many of us are dealing with the loss of parents, and I have found many teachers who follow a traditional approach to

this year of mourning: You find a daily minyan and you put that extra hour of prayer responsibility into your morning or evening schedule, making sure you are part of a community saying kaddish and remembering the dead on a daily basis.

So, this spring I found myself stepping outside of my private prayer world, publicly acknowledging that I was saying kaddish for a step-parent, and joining a group of strangers 2-3 times a week to pray a full morning service from an only semi-awakened state.

I disliked it at first. (indicate list)

- It was not my community.
- They davened way too fast.
- The goal of fulfilling an obligation overtook any possibility of kavanah, relevance, meaning in the prayer service.
- There were rules that I didn't understand – standing, sitting, special prayers for who knew what; tzedakah to give on a daily basis;
- It was hard not being a leader, though I realized early on I had no desire to become the lead speed davenor, racing through prayers to make sure we never went over the allotted time frame.

Still, who was I in this group of “others”? And where do I find my true self – in relationship to God, to my desire for generosity of spirit, to my honoring my

step-father? Is it in my own quiet room, the chapel of a nearby shul, in the words on the page, in the sounds of my heart?

Before I continue, I want to bring you back into the conversation, learning from one another. You have considered your earlier introductions to the world of prayer; I have shared glimpses of both personal and communal prayer. Now, I ask you to consider, first quietly in your own being, and then to share with one other: Share one thing you believe about prayer. Without the boundaries of personal vs. public experience in prayer, what is one thing you believe about prayer?

(5 minutes) – ask for 10 phrase responses!

From our study together and many conversations during the past few years, I have always framed the questions surrounding personal and public prayer as an either/or: for contemporary, liberal Jews, in particular, must we choose either the meaningful relevance of personal prayer or the communal authenticity of public worship?

But, recently, I am learning a new word, though...it is the word, **AND**. Being a personal pray-er AND a communal worshipper...I have been attending morning minyanim for months now, and I have moved myself...and sometimes AM moved!

**I have begun to enjoy the routine:** everything from the rush up the stairs to the smiling 7 a.m. faces; from remembering to put some dollars into my tallit bag every week in preparation for tzedakah to knowing how many times we stand up to say kaddish during the last part of the service.

I learned from Rabbi Dan Liben (who is also saying kaddish this year) **that it's okay to not try to say each word...**to let the sounds, nusach flow around you and to sometimes look at just one line in each psalm; one phrase in each prayer. Take time to find meaning, even when others are zooming ahead to page 64.

**I'm starting to love the barely understood words themselves.** Many days, it is the routine, the regularity of the prayers that give me something to hold onto amidst grief, pain and struggle. I can , every once in a while, stop thinking about how I'm feeling or how I'm reacting, and just daven those words on the page – just as they are. They feel great in my mouth and they sound great in unision with those around me...every once in a while...

**And it's beginning to feel a little like community.** It's not my shul; I don't stay for breakfast; but folks ask about Sidney – they mention his Hebrew name now at every Torah reading; and I notice the ones who are new mourners and the ones who are just there because....it's what they do. People come and go each month, but the prayer goes on.

So, from these reflections, and with the strength of your willingness to be inside this conversation, I offer one resolution from a wonderful teacher, Aryeh Ben-David, who has written a simple and loving book, called **the God File**. His premise: **you can't work on the content of prayer until you have a relationship**

with God... however you define God and however you imagine relationship. He explains a vertical experience in prayer – you and God in conversation, in listening, in yearning. In balance, he explains a horizontal relationship to prayer – with others, in community, in striving to make yourself fully what you need to be in our world. So, it's crucial to find your voice with God, and then to bring that voice with you to any and every prayer experience. And once you enter into that relationship, even in a changing state of life and mind and world, you can find the open yearning and desire within prayer – in so many more places. For neither the synagogue nor the prayerbook can CREATE your spiritual connection. You make the relationship; then our ancient and contemporary guides maintain, enhance and enrich it. You can find meaningful personal prayer within the context of authentic communal worship AND build upon the value of communal worship to enhance your personal prayers.

Each day, a prayer from the Amidah says: Sh'ma Koleinu...hear our voice! The traditional words continue:

*Have compassion upon us, pity us. Accept our prayer with loving favor. You listen to entreaty and prayer. Do not turn us away unanswered,...*

But, Rabbi Ben-David stops at those first words: Sh'ma Koleinu and says – let God hear your voice! Speak forth, call out, open the conversation....whether in your bedroom, the glory of Sudbury's conservation lands, or in a prayer service that pulls you along in its course of history, tradition, and awesome obligation.

When we begin the Amidah each Shabbat, our Rabbi teaches us to stand collectively in the presence of God, and yet call out as individuals. Let us now

offer the words: Sh'ma koleinu...Listen to our voices. I'll call out these words once; then please join me as we repeat them. Then, let's take a full minute – each of us in our own conversation – within this space of communal worship, we'll each speak silently, or quietly, moving or sitting, eyes opened or closed, and make our personal prayer connection from our open hearts.

She'ma Koleinu...