

Prayer is the Rope Connecting Us to God

5779—Rabbi David Kosak

Rosh Hashanah Day 1

This sermon is dedicated to Barb Schwartz. I'll tell you why later.

This summer, shortly after Jason Kaufman became our synagogue president he approached me and said, “Rabbi, we really like you, but you need to stop preaching about politics.”

“But Jason, Judaism really cares about the public realm and believes that Torah is supposed to shape society for the better; still, if it’s upsetting people, I won’t speak about politics anymore.”

Jason continued, “and while you are at it, please don’t talk about kashrut or Shabbat. It’s made a lot of the congregants uneasy because most of us don’t observe Shabbat or keep kosher. Especially not us Texans.”

Frankly, I was a bit shocked, but I think I just nodded thoughtfully.

Finally Jason said, “oh, also, many of the congregants prefer you not to preach about God because they think that’s an antiquated and primitive notion.”

At this point I’m pretty confused. “Ok, I think I have this, but help me out. What DO you want me to talk about?”

Jason shrugged and said, “Oh you know, Jewish stuff...”

That’s why I am going to talk about prayer today...it’s not Shabbat or Kashrut after all!

Thank you Jason for letting me cast that classic Jewish joke with you...

No, I want to talk about prayer today because it can literally save lives.

I want to talk about prayer today because so many of us are overwhelmed by the state of the nation. People I speak with are cynical or angry or outraged or dispirited and they are finding less pleasure in their lives. Prayer can help us find a calm center amidst the swirling storm.

I want to discuss prayer because at its heart, prayer is about making connections at the deepest levels of being—with ourselves, others and even God. And we need to connect. If I can paraphrase a Marvin Gaye song, prayer is all about spiritual healing. These days, that’s something we all need more of.

Connection lies at the heart of prayer. In the most colloquial usage, prayer is that activity where I ask for something from God. We speak, God listens. Sometimes, particularly in our Biblical stories, God answers.

Yet how many times have I been asked by a child who is wrestling with questions of faith, “Why doesn’t God speak to us now like God did in the Bible?”

At heart, the child is asking some remarkably sophisticated questions:

Why can’t I connect to God in the same way that the Biblical characters could?

If I can’t connect, prayer therefore seems disconnected from the life I know. It must therefore be either irrelevant, or worse, false.

And maybe the reason that there is no connection is because there is no God.

Maybe. But I think that's backward—the fact that we've lost our connection explains why we can't sense God. Some of you may remember the story I shared during my interview weekend here:

During my twenties, I was far removed from Jewish life. Truth be told, I was struggling to find myself, and that struggle sometimes bubbled up as anger. At the tail end of that period, I was living in San Francisco. One day I was heading to an art supply store. As I walked through their parking lot, a sedan started to back out, straight into me. I snapped, slamming my fist down on the trunk of the car, and screamed at the driver, “What sort of a moron are you?!”

That's when my angel appeared. A man. I don't recall whether he was the driver of the car or a bystander; regardless, he turned to me with no vehemence in his voice and said, “You've lost your connection to God.”

That one sentence froze me in my spot. It pierced my heart, and something in me opened wide. I **had** lost my connection to God. No one had ever said that to me before. Moreover, I knew he was right, and that one little sentence slowly worked through me. Not long after that—6 months perhaps, I started

attending synagogue regularly for the first time in many years. And not long after that, I remembered the mission I was so clear about as a small child—that I wanted to be a rabbi. I was reconnected to my source.

Connection. It's also one of the central requests in our High Holiday prayers—

וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כָּל־אֶגְדָּתָהּ אֶחָת

We pray that God should make this entire striving, pulsing congregation into a single bundle, much like the lulav.

Spiritual connection is one of the great marvels and mysteries of life, in part because it can work at a distance. We all expect that an apple is connected to a particular tree because it was once literally attached to that tree. Yet even after it is shipped from Oregon or Washington, that apple's seeds still contain the genetic message of the tree.

In a very real sense, that apple is never fundamentally separated from its source. It carries its source in its very core. All of the instructions to care for and provide for the next generation are inscribed in the apple's heart.

Too often, we forget that we are just like that apple.

Can prayer remind us of that? Can it work across time and space? Can it, in other words, have what in quantum science is known as non-locality? Put in the most simple of terms, can the private prayer of my heart impact the health or well-being of someone located across the hall, in the next city or perhaps in the next world? Does my prayer have an address? Can God, who in some important sense is somewhere else, hear my prayer? What about my Nana Pauline, who's been gone over thirty years?

Those are ultimately highly relevant questions. Yet in a certain way, those questions became irrelevant to me. Even though I believed in the power of prayer, for a long time, the most important part of prayer was how it might change me. Because if prayer could change me, it would then change the way I behave. If my behavior changed, then the way I connect to other people and even God could change.

And in a certain sense, prayer would have then proved it can operate at a distance, in a non-local way.

Maybe I can best convey this concept of prayerful connection with the story of my dad's deathbed. Now my father was a remarkable man in many ways. He was a stiff-upper lip sort of stoic, a man not given to complaining. He also was quite private in nature, and this was amplified by his scientific training as a chemist, which made him somewhat

matter-of-fact. This sensible reserve and quite nature, however, created a certain emotional distance between himself and his children.

All of those characteristics were apparent on his death bed. As waves of pain crashed through his body, he would merely grimace for a moment before his face would once again become placid. Watching him with the family, I developed a strong intuition that he was sticking around for us. He could discern how painful it was for his family to watch him die. Yet he was not the sort of person you could readily have that sort of discussion with.

On my last day with him before I had to return to rabbinical school for exams, I finally had the opportunity to be alone with him. My siblings and mother had gone to the hospital cafe for some coffee. I was in a state of anguish. My rock, my guide, my sensible daddy was fading away in a particularly painful manner. I closed my eyes, and tried to steady my breath. As it began to slow, I had the sense that I could connect to my father's soul, as though it was hovering above his death bed, half in this world and half in the next.

In that strange and ethereal place, I told him that it was ok for him to leave, that the family would be alright, that my mother would manage. I thanked him for being my father and for always providing such a clear moral example. I also said that

although it would have been easier for me if he had been more emotionally available, that I forgave him for that limitation. As that silent conversation began to wrap up, I found that my anguish had been replaced with a deep calm. I really was ok saying goodbye to my daddy. I kissed him on the forehead and left the room, the last time I would see him with breath in his body.

He died shortly thereafter.

What happened in that hospital room? Was it the same miraculous form of connection which allows a mortal human to communicate with an infinite God or that allows us to pray for another person's health, as we do each Shabbat here? Was it a meeting of two souls at a critical moment of farewell?

Or was it nothing more than the thoughts and imaginings of my own brain? Did I make it all up?

For a long time, the possibility that it was a fantasy didn't concern me. You see, despite how we colloquially think of prayer, quite a number of our greatest sages and religious guides understood that spiritual awakening is an internal relationship we have with ourselves. *P'nemiut*, or inwardness, fosters our relationships with the inner dimensions of our

being, which in turn will change the way we connect with others.

It didn't matter to me what the ultimate nature of that final conversation with my father was, because it deeply changed me. It healed the broken parts of my relationship with him and therefore with myself. I was changed for the better—and in the realm of spirit, that is a sufficient outcome to justify the silent realms of our prayer life and of our spiritual encounters.

Over the next 10 days, we'll be spending a great deal of time in prayer. If you focus only on this sort of *penimiut*, or inwardness, you will have achieved something of tremendous value, something that can change and perhaps save your life.

But we are discussing prayer today because Barbara Schwartz came into my office eight months ago. She was concerned because we had recently changed from reading a list of names of those who were ill at our daily minyan to distributing that list and including a mention of the list in our special *mi sheberach* prayer for the sick.

Barb was worried because she believed that by eliminating a public recitation, we would adversely impact those individuals' ability to heal. In defense of that perspective, she gave me a copy of Larry Dossey's book, "Prayer is Good Medicine."

I was intrigued by her gift, yet the book raised as many questions as it answered. First, the book was short on primary sources. Second, it was almost 30 years old. How well had its scientific claims held up over the intervening years? Can our prayer for a loved one, offered at a distance, create measurable, positive differences in outcomes?

Having previously learned that some of the early studies on prayer's power were poorly constructed, these questions were things I took seriously. They sent me down a rabbit hole; over the last eight months, I have read two books and a dozen evidence-based articles that test and address the spiritual potential of prayer and integrative medicine.

That may seem a bit overkill, but I take my Judaism, and religion itself, far too seriously to allow myself the luxury of false claims. As I explained in the story of my father, I don't *need* what I experienced at my father's death bed to be literally true or externally provable. It's power to change me is sufficient proof of the value of prayerful and intentioned communication — with a loved one or with God.

Despite my initial skepticism, we have solid evidence-based science that prayer works.

When measuring indices such as quality of life, physical activity, pain, promotion of health behaviors and even the clinical practice of health professionals, prayer worked and was more effective than other complementary strategies.

We have the science. We possess the data. Prayer works. Some would say it works at a distance, as when we recite the mi sheberach for those in our community who are ill.

Prayer works.

It doesn't work for all conditions. Asking for general-well being and the best possible outcome, for example works better than specifically asking that someone's cancer be cured. Prayer isn't magic. We all know that.

There's a lot that we still don't know. Like so many questions in science, it will take us many more decades to unravel the science of prayer, to separate out superstition from real religion. And that's ok. We have to trust the process.

How we pray, you see, matters as much as *that* we pray.

And the best quote I know for how to pray comes from Dominic John Chapman, a 19th century Roman Catholic priest. He said:

Pray as you can, not as you can't. x2

Prayer doesn't have to be fancy, but it does need to be sincere.

If the Hebrew works for you, use it, but don't read at an uncomfortable rate. No one gets a reward for saying all the words, though I often find saying all of the words rewarding.

If the translations or commentaries work for you, pray with those. Linger over their emotions and thoughts. Don't be in a hurry with them. Let them spark something in you.

Or you can sit there and let your heart know it can grow wide. As it does, you might discover that your tensions have melted away and you feel a simple joy. If you can do that, it's a marvelous prayer. I suspect that we can't really pray if we are feeling tense.

You see, I don't think any of us can pray unless we are gentle with ourselves and seek an authentic expression. We have to accept that sometimes we are closer to God, and sometimes God feels far away.

That ultimately is the message I want to leave you with today.

Prayer is the Rope Connecting Us to God.

We aren't here by accident. What we do in this room as a community... what we do in those silent moments of introspection...what we do standing over a death bed...

These connections are real. And they change the world itself.

Pray well my friends. Pray like you mean it. Pray as you can.