

Musical theater is a beloved pastime in American culture. Visitors flock to Broadway every year to experience the magic of live theater. This past June, I watched the Tony Awards, and came to appreciate certain changes that were part of the revival of the classic Broadway Show, Oklahoma! Written and composed by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, both of whom had Jewish roots, the message of the show is completely Jewish. “We know we belong to the Land; and the Land we belong to is grand!” It’s an echo that still rings true to our own Jewish identities. And even more impressive was the winner of the Tony for Best Performing Actress in a Musical, awarded to Ali Stroker from the cast of Oklahoma! Ms. Stroker is an accomplished actor and singer, and she made history as being the first Tony award winning actor to be in a wheelchair. Her moving acceptance speech was a highlight. Ms. Stroker’s challenges gave way to great hope and optimism when she said, “This award is for every kid watching tonight who has a disability, who has a limitation or a challenge, who has been waiting to see themselves represented in this arena. You are.” I cheered and celebrated with Ali Stroker that night for making an important statement about inclusion.

Many of us can identify with the need to feel included and accepted, especially on Yom Kippur. We look for entry points, and Judaism offers them. Our history helps us learn from the past. Our culture and traditions help unite us in the present. And our prayers help us plot a course for our collective future. Prayer has always been there to lift our spirits, to help change our perspective, and to inspire us toward action.

One prayer that is particularly meaningful is the Mi Shebeirach. It’s the prayer we offer to bring healing to those who are in need. By naming our family members and friends, we make it clear that we support them. A few years ago, a couple in our congregation was struggling after they learned about a serious medical diagnosis for their granddaughter. It came as quite a shock to her and her entire family. In discussions with the clergy and over several months, the grandparents came to appreciate the power of the Mi Shebeirach prayer. They began attending services. They heard the name of their granddaughter recited, and they joined the congregation in the prayer. Some weeks were better than others, but ultimately, this young woman found health and strength again. And now? The grandparents continue to attend services each week, and they have found meaning and joy in observing Shabbat with our congregation. For them, out of fear and uncertainty came a new point of entry.

For others, the results may not be as positive. But this doesn’t diminish the need for communal prayer and our need to comfort others. Often, the challenges that we face can be overcome by our attitude. Life often seems like a series of tests. Many of our biblical leaders faced challenges and responded to them. At the age of 70, Abraham left everything he had ever known. In the story of the Akedah, the binding of Isaac, he was prepared to sacrifice his son. That couldn’t have happened without believing in a higher power.

Moses’ brother, Aaron, also faced challenges. His sons were killed and when Aaron witnessed this, Torah tells us that he “fell silent.” Perhaps in that moment he needed to pray privately. He couldn’t find

any words to express his pain. Moses also struggled. But, Moses offered a simple yet beautiful prayer of healing on behalf of his sister, Miriam. In the Book of Numbers we read, “el nah re’fah nah la, O, God please heal her.”<sup>1</sup> And she was healed.

Praying silently like Aaron did, and praying on behalf of others like Moses did, are helpful models of prayer for us. Finding God through prayer isn’t easy. We aren’t served well by the image of God as a wise old man with a long white beard sitting high above us in judgment.<sup>2</sup> So, how can we better connect to God? We must first rid ourselves of these images. Moses Cordovero, a 16<sup>th</sup> century mystic speaks of the enlightened person. This type of individual can look beyond a God of bodily categories. The enlightened one finds a way to imagine his or her place as part of small sphere, embedded within many other larger spheres. To find yourself situated within a much larger expanse brings about a sense of awe and humility. Cordovero writes that cultivating a sense of awe is to fall in love with your soul and to understand its capacity to fit within the continuous wonders of the universe.<sup>3</sup>

There is no question that to engage in a regular worship practice is difficult. There are many challenges we have today with worship and prayer. We don’t invest the time it takes to appreciate it. We don’t see the purpose of it – especially if we struggle with our faith in God. And the prayers themselves are in Hebrew, a language many of us don’t read or understand. So let’s take a look at each of these: Time, Faith, and Hebrew - and see how we can understand new perspectives to these challenges.

First, the issue of time. In an age where highspeed is almost too slow, we seek immediate gratification. But prayer requires a regular practice. It takes time. And even when we do offer heartfelt prayers, we may feel that they go unanswered. Sometimes we might walk away from prayer entirely. We become outraged with a God who allows the innocent to suffer and the good to die too young. Even more, our society seems resistant in allowing us the time we need. Certainly, our schedules have only gotten busier and more hectic, but our tradition reminds of us an important principle. Prayer is a necessity, not a luxury.

Rabbi Larry Hoffman, a professor of liturgy at the Hebrew Union College – Jewish Institute of Religion speaks of prayer as an important ritual. Often, rituals are sacred because they are somewhat mysterious. We do them because our ancestors have done them for centuries, and we want to continue the tradition. Sometimes, there is no rational explanation for them at all. Praying connects us to God. It’s about creating transcendent moments that are beautiful and powerful. In these fleeting moments we are vulnerable; and at those times God’s presence may be felt.<sup>4</sup>

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai to find the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, he shattered the tablets containing the Ten Commandments. He then went back up the mountain to obtain the second set. Rabbis over the centuries wondered – what happened to these broken tablets? Our

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<sup>1</sup> Numbers 12:13

<sup>2</sup> Daniel 7:9

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Moses Cordovero, “Or Ne’erav,” ed. Yehuda Z. Brandwein, 2:2 (18b-19a), paraphrased p. 22, *The Essential Kabbalah*, Daniel C. Matt.

<sup>4</sup> Hoffman, Rabbi Larry. *The Art of Public Prayer*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Skylight Paths, p.240 (2011).

tradition teaches that they weren't discarded. They remained with the people.<sup>5</sup> The broken pieces were just as important as the completed set. Like getting a second chance, when it is granted, we cherish it. On Yom Kippur we should feel a bit broken. We are unsure of what lies ahead for us. But, we must begin by investing our spiritual bank accounts with small deposits. We can develop a prayer practice by participating in worship either in person or via livestream. To pray is to study and as our tradition teaches, "when we pray, we talk to God; when we study, God talks to us."<sup>6</sup> After all, the verb for prayer in Hebrew, *l'hitpalel*, is written in the reflexive form. At its core, it implies that we should engage in prayer for ourselves and for our own benefit.

The second issue that makes prayer difficult is when we struggle with our faith in God itself. If prayer is a means to engage with God, and we question God's existence, then why bother? While we may strive for something tangible, prayer is an opportunity for us to reflect on our own needs. When we turn inward and confront the burdens of our own souls, we engage with God. It's not easy, and we are meant to wrestle with it. The prayer of Unataneh Tokef we offered a few moments ago asks challenging questions. "Who shall live? Who shall die?" All of us hope to live. None of us wants to experience death. So, we must make the most out of each of our days. We give of ourselves by serving and helping others, which is how we connect to God. Prayer is a way for us to meditate on the meaning of our own purpose and our own experience – regardless of whether we feel God's presence. We read that even Moses was only permitted to see God from behind. That is, we can perceive God's actions in this world by looking behind at what has already happened. Some people may do this and only choose to see a myriad of coincidences. But faith is a decision; we can decide to view our history with God having led the way. Not that God caused our history – people make decisions and act on them all the time. But the more we connect to what God wants from us, then the better our decisions will be.

So how can we do this? Alan Morinis, the foremost scholar on the modern study of Mussar, a Jewish ethical practice, helps us understand faith in this way. For him, "the primary question is not whether or not one believes in God, but rather a more empirical issue of where to look to find God. If one knows where to look, then the potential to perceive reality exists."<sup>7</sup> Prayer is one way where we can look for God.

Prayer doesn't only take place in the synagogue or even at a favorite spot in our home. Prayer can take place outside in the mountains, at the beach, or anywhere else. Recently, I read an inspiring book by Richard Cohen, a business man from Alabama who at the age of 60 literally ran across the United States - from the east coast to the west coast.<sup>8</sup> His plan was simple – to run 20 miles a day for 119 days. Physically, it took a great deal of strength, but he also did it with prayer. On his runs, he meditated on his life and what he wanted to accomplish with what is left. He became closer to his Jewish heritage and through his running, he raised awareness and funds for charities he was most passionate. For Cohen, his running goals

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<sup>5</sup> B.T. Menachot 99a-b.

<sup>6</sup> Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, Chancellor of JTS from 1951–1972.

<sup>7</sup> Morinis, Alan. *Everyday Holiness*. Trumpeter Books, Shambhala Publications, Inc: Boston, page 223. (2007)

<sup>8</sup> Cohen, Richard. *20@60*. Digital Lightbridge: Florida (2013).

convinced him that he could accomplish something lofty. Challenging our bodies, both spiritually and physically, ultimately leads us to greater contentment and wholeness.

But we don't need to run across the country to experience this. We can do so much in isolation today. All we need is a laptop or phone and nothing else seems to matter. But we discount the value of coming together in community at fixed times for worship. The synagogue helps ease the hurt and burdens of the outside world. In here, we find healing and peace. We find friendship and community. And, maybe even as the old joke goes, we learn something about why we pray. A teenage son asks his father, who proclaims to be an atheist, 'why is it that you go to the Temple and pray? Do you really believe that you are talking to God?' "No, says the father. I don't go to Temple to talk to God. I go to Temple to talk to Schwartz - and he talks to God." Engaging with our community can be just as sacred and holy as connecting to God.

Beyond the challenges of our Time and our Faith, a final obstacle that can be even more difficult is the Hebrew language of prayer. For most of us, Hebrew isn't our native dialect. It seems archaic. And, while we may appreciate the *lashon kodesh*, the sacred tongue, we don't understand it. But we want to connect to it despite our inadequacies. Sometimes, we just feel that prayer is like a canyon that we cannot pass.

But there is an answer and a response to this challenge. We can build a bridge over the canyon. And one way is with our prayerbook. It is arguably the most important book of any in our tradition, and it helps us follow the service. We can feel it. We can touch it. We can hold it. We can make sense out of the chaos of prayer if we know the order and structure of our services. The nuance between each section with the poetic translations help us make connections and build our bridge. And, whether or not we understand every word, we can appreciate the themes of our prayers. We find love in the *V'ahavata*. A powerful reminder of what should be at the heart of all the prayers we offer. Our appreciation for the gift of freedom in the *Mi Chamocho* reminds us of our history. We pray for protection as we offer the *Hashkiveinu* prayer. Ultimately, what we seek for is *kavannah*, the intention behind our prayers. To pray authentically without distraction is to be completely immersed in the experience.

We need only look at the evolution of our prayerbooks to understand the strong connection to our past. From the Union Prayer Book, to the Gates of Prayer to *Mishkan Tefillah* and *Mishkan HaNefesh*, our focus has changed. In recent years, we've returned to more tradition. With transliteration on every page, Hebrew doesn't have to be the obstacle it once was. It can serve as a point of entry, and as a bridge over the canyon, rather than a dead end.

We are *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel. *Yisrael* means to wrestle and ultimately to prevail. Being Jewish means to inherit certain rituals and traditions that aren't always easy. But they link us to our past and help prepare us for our future. Prayer is an important part of our heritage. It isn't quite like reading our favorite magazine or novel, but it's more than that. It's about returning to a familiar piece of history that needs us and our personal touch. We can't turn our back on our family history. It's too valuable and precious.

Any meaningful endeavor requires work. It takes patience and time, effort and dedication. And while challenges exist to our time, our faith, and the Hebrew language, we can find new perspectives. This isn't so different than Ali Stroker, recipient of the Tony Award for her role in Oklahoma! She found her way and her voice and rose above her challenges. Today, on Yom Kippur, let us strive to make deeper and more meaningful connections through prayer. Let this New Year serve as our opportunity to embrace prayer and infuse it with our own personal touch. Let us work together to be inspired by our prayers and our liturgy. May this new year of 5780 connect us to greater time, faith, and more appreciation for the Hebrew language. Ken Yehi Ratzon, may this be God's will. Amen.