

Rosh Hashanah evening – September 9, 2018 / 1 Tishrei 5779
Rabbi Helen Cohn – Congregation M'kor Hayim
“Words, Music, Silence”

Tonight I would like to break with tradition.

Usually my talk is at the end of the service; tonight I would like to begin with it. Why? I think we need all the help we can get in taking advantage of the Jewish gift of the High Holy Days. And so, with us poised on the doorway of the Ten Days of Awe, prayer books in hand, I would like to reflect on *prayer*.

Recently one of my sons went on a 10-day solo wilderness hike. His only communication with the world was a satellite device that had three pre-set messages: All is well; I need help but it's not life-threatening; it's an emergency--send help immediately. On the day he was scheduled to return, I received the second message. It included his longitude and latitude coordinates and a phone number for me to call. Period. No way for me to reply to him or for him to give any more information.

Let's skip to the good ending: the forest rangers, using the coordinates and riding more than four hours in the dark on horseback, found him dehydrated and a bit disoriented, but basically ok. He had taken a wrong turn on a poorly-marked trail and was totally lost, and knew he could not find his way back.

Nine hours passed between when I received the help message and when I got a call from the rangers that he had been found and was ok.

During those nine hours I noticed I was doing something like praying. It's no secret that I do not believe in a deity “out there” that intervenes in human affairs, especially in response to prayers. Yet for a surprising moment I noticed myself thinking I should pray for my son's safety. It seemed like a natural response to such a critical situation. But I reminded myself that the situation was what it was, and praying for it to be different was not going to change it. And so I did pray, but in a different way. My prayer was sending him good vibes, telling him help was on the way, offering silent words of comfort and reassurance.

I don't know if he sensed my prayer. I hope he did, but that's not my point. My experience points to a central purpose of prayer: to get in touch with, and to express, the deepest wishes of our hearts.

I'm going to speak of different types of prayer, but we first should begin with the question: to whom, to what, are we praying?

Albert Einstein, speaking of the majestic order of the universe, said “Try and penetrate with our limited means the secrets of nature and you will find ... that there remains something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration for this force beyond anything

we can comprehend is my religion.” In contrast, Rabbi Arthur Green suggests that prayer is the way the Divine within each of us communicates with us.

These two statements reflect the range of ways we might consider God: from a totally transcendent and unknowable deity to a deity which is actually within each of us—we humans who are created in the divine image.

But I don't want to get all theological with you tonight. I simply want to help us shed some of the resistance we might have to the language and imagery of these High Holy Day services. That's why I mention the range of ways we could relate to the word “God” in our liturgy. Rather than be put off by the anthropomorphic language, we can accept it as metaphor. For example, I know someone who would substitute the word “good” whenever “God” appeared in the prayers. I invite each of you to find a way to interpret the God-language that fills the prayers in the machzor, our High Holy Day prayer book.

So now I would like to offer some ways to enter into prayer during these days.

Let's begin with the words.

Our prayer book contains language that is more than 1500 years old, much of it unchanged. Perhaps our ancestors who created these prayers had a more literal belief than we do, but that's not a reason to throw the prayers out. I hope you share with me a sense of familiarity and home-coming as we come to “Aveinu Malkeinu,” “Al cheit,” or any of the other special prayers for this season. And the connection is not limited to our own memory of past High Holy Days. We also have our memories of other places and other loved ones with whom we shared these same words. These words are being said in some form all over the world tonight. They have been said by generations of Jews for many centuries. Arthur Green calls the liturgy a “deep echo-chamber” of which we are now a part. These words are what we call “keva,” or fixed prayer language.

But there are other words that are humming in the background for each of us, words that are ours alone. For example, look inward for a moment and see what your earnest wish is this year, right now, at the High Holy Days. [Pause] *That*, I would say, is your personal prayer, the “kavanah” or intention that you bring to our time together.

One other thing about the words. Hebrew is our historic language of prayer, but please don't worry if you don't know it. You have several options when we are singing the Hebrew prayers: transliteration (so you can follow along), English translation (so you know what is being said), or simply allowing yourself to float on the ancient sounds and melodies and watch where that takes you.

One place it takes us is beyond the words, to the music itself, which is the second component of our prayers, after the words. I hardly need to remind you of the power of music to touch us in ways words never can. There are certain songs from my youth (like those of Janice Joplin or the Beatles) that, when I hear them, take over my body, mind and memory. Other kinds of music transport me beyond the immediate present to some

wordless place of feeling: sometimes tears, sometimes joy, sometimes longing. We could say our souls are a harp on which music plays its message.

One of the high points of tomorrow's service—something I look forward to each year—is what we call the Big Aleinu. [Emily sings first line] The music more than the words speaks of our submission to What Is. It says: we must bow down to the majesty and irrefutable power of creation, to our small place in the vastness of time and space. It tells us also to acknowledge our uniqueness and obligation to the world. The Aleinu is part of every prayer service, but the special musical setting for Rosh Hashanah raises us in a unique way as prayer should: it helps us get in touch with the essence of being human.

Then there is the opening of the Unatana Tokef prayer. [Emily sings opening words] We might not agree with the words of the prayer, they might even make us actively uncomfortable: “On Rosh Hashanah it is written and on Yom Kippur it is sealed...who will live and who will die.” But the music strikes dread into our hearts anyway. Life and death *are* out of our hands. We are called with urgency and deep seriousness to examine our lives and, as the Rabbis say, to feel regret, and to make amends one day before our death (which means repenting and striving to make things right every day we are alive).

Let the music of our service take you beyond the words and the intellect. Let the music take you to a place of feeling and reflection. Let emotions arise. Be willing to be surprised and touched.

If music takes us deeper than words, then silence takes us deeper still. This is the realm of pure personal prayer. Not the fixed prayers given to us by the prayer book, but the unspoken words of our heart. Earlier I asked you to consider your wish right now, as the High Holy Days begin. [pause] The response comes in the silence. Prayer is not just about speaking, it is equally about listening to the still, quiet voice that can only be heard when the storms of sound have passed.

That's why you will notice that we are not going to rush from one prayer to the next, or one section to the next. Take advantage of the pauses to reflect on whatever we have just said or sung. Approach the silences with openness, and see what arises in your heart of hearts.

Words, music, and silence. You might think I have only been talking about the High Holy Days, and that's mostly true. But I am also suggesting how these forms of prayer might be a part of your lives, not just at services, but all year long. We can speak our own prayerful words aloud or in our mind, be aware of how music transports us to higher realms, use silence to connect with inner wisdom. All of these are forms of prayer.

For now, as we begin the Days of Awe, may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, O source of life and blessing.

Amen