

There is a Talmudic tale, told by Eric Kimmel that goes as follows:

“There is a story of a simple shepherd, who every day would offer his personal prayer to God: “God, I love you so much, that if you were here, I would give you half of my sheep. If it was raining and you were cold, I would share my blanket with you.”

One day a great rabbi was walking by the field, and he heard the shepherd praying. He ran up to him, and said “do you call that praying? Are you kidding? What would God do with your sheep? Of what use would a blanket be to God? Here, let me show you how to pray properly before you further desecrate God’s holy name!” The rabbi then got out a siddur, and gave a brilliant lecture on the structure and meaning of the various prayers, and explained what to say and when to the poor illiterate shepherd.

As soon as the rabbi left, the shepherd sat there dumbfounded. He didn’t understand a word of it. But he knew the great rabbi was quite upset that his prayers were not proper. So he stopped praying.”

This story resonates with me, as I teach the structure and the meaning of the various prayers to our Dalet students, to our B’nai Mitzvah families and to our adult learners. It made me think, do my students walk out of these classes thinking, “I didn’t understand what the cantor was talking about”? I hope that the answer is no. However, if they don’t

understand, maybe they can figure out a way to make meaning in prayer for themselves.

In order to develop an understanding of prayer, even to create our own, it will be helpful to understand how our prayers as we know them came into written existence. Our oldest prayer is the Sh'ma which is found in the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy. This is a prayer that the majority of Jewish people know, even if they are more culturally Jewish. It is a prayer that is recited in the morning and in the evening, when we put our children to bed and the last words that are sometimes recited by someone who is dying. Then during the Babylonian exile, prayer began to be recited as an offering to God, when sacrifices were no longer being done. As Hosea said, "The offering of our lips instead of bulls." Around the 5th century B.C.E, a group of Rabbi's lead by Rabbi Gamliel, sat down and put the service together, pretty much in the order that we recite it today. And if you think about it, we have prayers for everything. We have prayers to thank God for waking up, for making sure that our bodies are working in the correct way, for health, for forgiveness, for redemption, for creation and the list goes on.

As, the Cantor, I teach the Keva, the fixed order of the prayers, but there is much more to that fixed order, there is also the Kavanah, the intention of the prayer.

What does that intention really mean? Do I really need to pray the words that are in the prayerbook? Can I close my eyes during the service and create my own prayer space and my own words. The Hebrew word for worship is Avodah; which also means work. Praying sometimes takes work, it isn't always easy to pray whether the words are there on a page in front of us or whether we are trying to speak our own words. I was always in awe of my classmates in my Pastoral Education class a few years ago, at how easily they could put together a personal prayer at the bedside of a patient. This is not something that I find easy to do. It is avodah, it is work and yet, when the words come, then it is prayer and leads to a moment of worship.

Last night, we began the service with the Hin'ni. Of all the prayers that we recite and sing for the holy days, it is this prayer that lays on my shoulders. It comes from the premise that though we are all sinners, neither I, nor you, should be put to shame. It is my role as cantor, asking God, on behalf of all of you, to hear our prayers. "Let our prayers come before you innocent and sweet." "God of every age, let my prayer find

favor for the sake of the righteous, the loyal, the honest and upright.” It is a humbling experience to ask God ultimately to hear our prayers and to forgive us.

Beginning at Rosh HaShanah and concluding this afternoon, we will continually be asking God for forgiveness for all our wrongdoings. This is our time when we must learn to forgive ourselves, our spouses, our children, our friends, those we may no longer call friends and to forgive and be forgiven by God. This morning, we recited the Un’taneh Tokef prayer in which we said, “On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed, who will live and who will die... but t’shuvah, meaning returning, turning or repentance, Prayer and righteous deeds can transform the evil of the decree. Rabbi Alan Lew, of blessed memory, in his book [This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared](#), says this about the Un’taneh Tokef, “Prayer, righteousness, and T’shuvah will not change what happens to us; rather, they will change us.” He continues, “Spiritual practice won’t change what happen. Rather, it will help us experience what happens not as evil, but simply as what happens. Spiritual practice will help us to understand that everything that happens, even the decree of death, flows from God.”

Praying is something that we do as individuals and together as a community. Rabbi Lew says, “Ordinarily we think we should pray to ask for

things, or to bend God's will to our own. But it is no secret to those who pray regularly and with conviction that one of the deepest potentials of prayer is that it can be a way we come to know ourselves." He further adds, "There is something about the mechanics of prayer that causes us to know ourselves. Like all spiritual activities, Jewish communal prayer has a point of focus, in this case, the words of the prayer book." The words and the actions may be directed at us individually and yet, here we are all praying together as a community.

Let's look at one place in the service that creates an individual moment, but one that can enhance the rest of our experience in a service. The beginning of our service really begins in the individual moment of putting on our tallit. While most of us that wear tallitot are familiar with the actual blessing for the wearing of it, there is actually a reading that comes before. The text is called Bar'chi Nafshi and following the conclusion of this sermon, we will have the pleasure to hear a beautiful rendition of this text written by Grammy winning composer, Itaal Shur, son of Bonia Shur of blessed memory, written in honor of my 20th year here at Congregation Shir Hadash. The text says, "Unnamable God, I summon all my strength to praise: You are fathomless, yet close to me. Clothed in splendor, wrapped

in light like a cloak, You stretch out the sky, celestial tent.” By wrapping ourselves in the Tallit, we envelop ourselves in God and in prayer.

And for those who don't wear a tallit, our machzor has a blessing for you as well: “Source of blessings - Eternal, our God, majestic in power: Your splendor reveals the way to holiness; Your light wraps us in the beauty of this sacred day.” Whether you are wrapped in the tallit or wrapped in light that helps begin our day, we are enveloped within the arms of God. Our liturgy then begins with the prayer thanking God for letting me wake up this morning, Modeh Ani, I give thanks. First we are enveloped and feel the love and then we offer thanks. Just like being offered a big hug when we are troubled and sad. First we are enveloped and feel cared for and then we say, “thanks, I needed that.”

I discovered the idea of being enveloped by the tallit, not at my own bat mitzvah, but at summer camp at Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute Summer Camp in its 7 week summer program called Chalutzim. It was the summer before my confirmation year and we studied tallit during the summer. I decided that I wanted a tallit. But I grew up in a classical reform congregation. Not only did women not wear tallism, but most of the men didn't either and our rabbi and cantor wore what is called an atara, the neckband of the tallit. I was excited to get my tallit, so my mother took me

to Devon avenue in Chicago and we went to Rosenblum's Judaica and I picked out as close to a feminine tallit that I could find at that time. And I wore my tallit and if you look at my confirmation picture on the wall of the synagogue, I would be easy to pick out as I am the only person wearing a tallit. My connection to Judaism became more concrete as I enveloped myself in that tallit. Just as we begin each of our B'nai Mitzvah services presenting a tallit to our children, not only are we enveloping them within our arms, but within the arms of Judaism and with God.

As our story ended, the shepherd stopped praying, and for many of us, that may be where the story ends. Fortunately for the shepherd, there is more to his story: "Up in Heaven, God noticed the silence, and said "what happened to the beautiful prayers of my humble shepherd?" He decided to send an angel down to go and find out what was wrong. The angel found the shepherd, and the shepherd told him the whole story of his meeting with the rabbi. The angel said, "what does that rabbi know? Would you like to see how we pray in Heaven?" The shepherd instantly agreed and the angel whisked him off to Heaven, where he saw a Heavenly Host standing and proclaiming: "God, I love you so much, that if you were here, I would give you half of my sheep. If it was raining and you were cold, I

would share my blanket with you.” The shepherd happily went back to his prayers, and God happily listened.”

My teacher, Rabbi Kerry Olitzky said in his book Sacred Intentions, “There are songs of the heart that emerge from a passionate belief in God. These songs are woven from the days of our lives. Wherever you are, whatever your voice, “Shiru Ladonai, Shir Hadash: “Sing a new song to God.” So may it be with prayer, that we make our prayers from the moments in our lives and use our voices to create that new song, that new prayer or use one already written to help build on the foundation of our souls.

The rabbis of old gave us the fixed order, the rabbis of new, gave us new interpretations to pray these ancients words and texts, but it is up to us to find the words of our own hearts and to find our own ways to be wrapped within God’s light. May the year 5777 be one full of good health, joy, blessings and our prayers, so that we too may be wrapped in God’s Tallit.