

Praying the Shema
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No one ever taught me how to pray. Not in rabbinical school, not at home when I was growing up, certainly not at Hebrew School when I was a kid. Oh, I learned some of the prayers, I learned the words, I learned some Hebrew (and not to be disrespectful to my parents, who are sitting right here, I distinctly remember talking with them about God and prayer when I was growing up), but the process of prayer is so difficult to teach, and in truth, I think a lot of Jews have never really learned how to approach prayer.

What are we supposed to do when we are praying? Do you just read the words in the machzor, the prayerbook? What if I'm reading the words and I'm thinking about dinner, or the Red Sox? Or I'm thinking about my wife and family and how much they mean to me? Is that praying? What if I disagree with something in a prayer or I find an image of God disturbing or inaccessible? Is that praying? How about if I come to synagogue and I don't really focus on the prayers, but I think about teshuvah, change and growth, or the ways I want this new year to be different. Does that count as prayer? And of course, there are the Jews who love the community but just aren't that connected with the "God talk" of the service. There's the old story where a guy says, "My friend Goldberg goes to shul to talk to God. I go to shul to talk to Goldberg." So this evening, as the new year begins, I want to share some thoughts about one way that you might approach a particular prayer, one of the central prayers in our tradition: the Shema: "Listen, Israel. Adonai is our God. Adonai alone, or Adonai is One." And I want to share some thoughts not only as to how to approach this particular prayer, but also suggest how the prayer can frame questions for us to consider as we begin a new year.

So first, I want to stress that I'm only sharing one approach here. There are many ways to engage with the prayers. I try to look at the words of the machzor, the High Holiday prayerbook, as a springboard to send me up, not as an anchor to drag me down. So when I read a particular phrase, in Hebrew or English, I try to have the words trigger associations and questions in my mind, not unlike a liturgical, a spiritual Rorschach. If I read the words, "with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my might," I can go off thinking about my life. What are the things I do "with all my heart," fully engaged and involved? Are there things I wished I did with all my might? Maybe I need to change some things in this coming year. So too, other words like "Israel," "Shalom," or "You shall love," might trigger particular reactions, thoughts or questions. I recognize that the rabbis used poetry and metaphor as they constructed the prayerbook, so I feel no compulsion to be stuck in a literal understanding of the prayers. So too, there is no need to feel that you need to be in lock-step with the leader. It's the leader's job to tell you where the service is, but not necessarily where you are in the service. If you find a prayer, a thought, a question that engages you, stay with it. We have far too little time to think about what's important to us in life. These services can be one of those precious times.

So let's move on to the Shema, which begins in the imperative: "Shema, Yisrael!" Listen, Israel! Now, this isn't referring to the country of Israel as much as to Am Yisrael, the people Israel. But while the command is said to our people as a whole, we, of course, hear it as individuals. So sometimes after I say the Shema, I'll say it again and put my own name in it: Listen, Jeff. And then I'll stop and I'll think about listening, one of the most powerful things we can do in our life. It's easy to talk and Jews are great talkers. Have you ever been with a bunch of Jews, usually around a table with food, and tried to get a word in edgewise? But to stop and listen is something else. To focus on someone we love and actually listen to what they want to say. We might be fighting with someone we care about, and the Shema can remind us to stop being defensive so that we can take in loving criticism from a person who has something important to say to us. The key to making a new friend, to falling in love, ultimately isn't about talking. It's about listening. So when I read the words "Shema Yisrael," I try to flash on those times in my life when I need to be a better listener. I try to think about the people I need to make time to listen to. I try to clear away some of the incessant noise and craziness so I have the room to listen, and to really hear what I need to make my life, my family, my friendships deeper and more complete. Shema! Listen!

The next phrase is complicated and simple all at once: "Adonai Elohenu:" Adonai is our God. As Jews, our God is not corporeal. The rabbis thought that to think of God like Zeus, an old man with a long white beard, was worse than silly; it was idolatrous. Our God, according to the rabbis, is the creative power behind the universe. Our God is the perfect blend of justice and mercy. Our God is the force that provides people with the strength to do teshuvah, to change and grow, to correct and move beyond the inevitable mistakes we make in our lives, to redeem and free ourselves from the things in our lives that constrict and constrain us. Our God is about the commitment to perfecting the world and achieving peace through justice. Our God is about the power of love to bring together parents and children, brothers and sisters, families and friends. And when we say, "Adonai is our God," what we are saying, and what I try to think about, is that these are the concepts that should govern our lives, not all the other things that seem to grab and rule our time: work, money, prestige, power. There's a quote I always think about on Rosh Hashanah, by Ralph Waldo Emerson:

"The gods we worship write their names on our faces, be sure of that. And we will worship something — have no doubt about that either. We may think that tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of the heart — but it will out. That which dominates our imagination and our thoughts will determine our life and character. Therefore it behooves we should be careful what we are worshipping, for what we are worshipping we are becoming."

And when I say, "Adonai Elohenu," I try to ask: What are the things that I want to rule my actions, life, the values that I should be living out, day to day?

And finally, "Adonai Ehad:" God is One. Now, some people here have heard me teach about how I believe this statement means much more than Judaism is a monotheistic, rather than polytheistic, religion. Of course that it true, but I think these words are

teaching much more. In our tradition, God is ultimately about oneness; the things that bring us together. God is the understanding that there are intricate webs of connection in the world. To know God is to understand how much we are connected to the people around us, not only in our communities but throughout the world: to the woman who is cooking breakfast in Carmichael, to the coffee farmer in Uganda who picked the coffee you drank today, to the guy who made the car you drive. If we really saw that big picture, if we really understood those connections, we couldn't hurt another human being, we couldn't be oblivious to other peoples' health and well being. Because we would understand that when we do, we are hurting ourselves. So when I say the Shema and come to the phrase "Adonai Ehad," God is One, is Oneness, I try to think about how I am sustaining those connections in my life. I try to envision how I might bring people closer together, to deepen and strengthen the bonds among the members of my family, among my friends, within my various communities.

Now, I'm not saying that when I pray the Shema I think about all of these questions. But these are some of the associations I try to make to these words. Sometimes, I focus on a few very specific questions. Other times, I let many of these associations wash over my thoughts and I try to pick out the questions that might push me to think more clearly, realizations that would help me grow into the person I most want to be.

There are many ways to pray. Tonight, I only suggest one way that I try to use the words in the prayerbook. I hope the new year gives us an opportunity to think about what is really important to us. I hope that our thoughts lead us to action and that our actions bring fulfillment and happiness into our lives and into the lives of the people connected to us. May we all be inscribed for many blessings in the book of life. Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah.