

The Gates of Prayer Are Always Open
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Shabbat Shalom and Shanah Tovah.

I have a question for you this morning, an assignment really. Something for you to consider doing in the coming week. It is related to a little custom we have here at Beth Shalom. Perhaps you have noticed it when we take out and put away our Torah scrolls.

Our main Torah scroll has a silver breastplate. On that breastplate is a little Torah ark with a little door that has its own little latch. It is really very adorable. And irritating, sometimes, because throughout the year, almost every Shabbat, that door always starts to swing open. You may have noticed me or the gabbaim trying to close it, especially as we put the Torah Scrolls back in the Ark. But beginning the month of Elul, which begins our period of repentance, and continuing through the end of the period of repentance on the seventh day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabbah, we keep that little door open. And the door suddenly cooperates and remains open.

Can anyone guess why?

According to our tradition, these ten days between the beginning of Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year), which began last Sunday night, and Yom Kippur, which starts this coming Tuesday night, are

These ten days are considered an *eit ratzon*, a propitious time for prayer. According to tradition, the very gates of heaven are spread wide open so that our prayers may easily enter at this time of year. That is why we keep the little door on our Torah breastplate open at this time of year: we hope and pray that the gates of heaven will be open and welcoming of all our heartfelt and sincere prayers.

According to tradition, the gates of prayer start closing as Yom Kippur wanes with its closing service of Neilah. But the gates of prayer never truly close to us. I think that is what the holy little silver door on our Torah breastplate is trying to teach us every time it gives the gabbai a hard time making it difficult to close once the holy days are over.

I think the little silver door keeps trying to open and stay open to send us a message that even after the holidays are over, even after tradition tells us the gates of prayer are closed, they really aren't. The gates of prayer are never closed. God is always listening for a contrite heart, always listening in sympathy to our pains, our fears, and our dreams. And our little holy silver door on our Torah breastplate reminds us of that every time it opens and refuses to close easily. It really is very sweet that we have such a holy little door on our Torah breastplate.

But more importantly, I hope we can take to heart the message it has been trying to tell all these years. *Karov Adon-ai l'kol korav, God is close to all who call*, as we just recited in Ashrei. (Psalms 145:18)

These ten days between the first night of Rosh Hashanah and the end of Yom Kippur are called the *aseret yemai teshuvah*, the ten days of repentance, the ten days of turning, of returning, or changing. These ten days provide us with the incredible opportunity to create new patterns of behavior in our personal lives, hopefully, new patterns of behavior we will sustain beyond these ten days in ways that will enrich our lives and our relationships.

One of the relationships we often overlook is our relationship with God. As a Jew, there are many different ways to think about God, from the impersonal First Cause and Creator of Maimonides to the very involved and caring Guardian and Parent of King David and the Baal Shem Tov. But all of them shared the belief that prayer was important. Despite their very different views about God, they experienced prayer as an essential part of their relationship to God and their identity as Jews.

So, here is where I come to your assignment. I would like you to try something that might be new or different for some of you. It is not a mission impossible.

All I am asking you to do is devote ten minutes daily for the rest of these Ten Days of Repentance to prayer and/or meditation. Some of you already do that in your personal practice or by attending our daily minyan.

If you do not yet regularly attend minyan, I encourage you to do so, not only because those saying mourners kaddish need help ensuring there is a minimum of ten for the minyan prayer quorum. Something is comforting being about in this sanctuary when it is quiet, standing with fellow Jews reciting prayers our ancestors have recited for thousands of years.

But prayer is not just a communal obligation. I would like you to take on this assignment because I would like you to discover the joy and meaning of making prayer a routine in your life. You can start by spending five minutes before you go to bed, sharing with God what was challenging about the day and thanking God for the joyful and the good. Perhaps you can read the Shema before laying down to rest. Notice if you fall asleep more easily if you sleep more soundly.

Perhaps you want to spend the other five minutes in the morning thanking God for waking, rising, and being able to see. There is a beautiful list in our prayerbook on p. 65, which is also part of our weekday prayers. You can recite the Shema again, declaring God's unity and the call to love God with all your heart, soul, and might, whether inside your home or while on your way outside it. Think about where you might encounter God today and ask for God's help in whatever you are preparing to face as you prepare for the day. Notice if these prayers help you find your center, strength, and balance.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement. ...get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

If you have found this experiment in prayer to be meaningful and helpful, I encourage you to continue through the seventh day of Sukkot, Hoshana Rabba, which is the last day of Sept., the last day of the season of repentance. This is our makeup exam time, so to speak, during which the gates of heaven still are open to our prayers.

But as our little door on our Torah breastplate reminds us, the gates of prayer are always open to us. So perhaps you will find that this assignment, this experiment, is worth making part of your regular personal practice, even after all the holy days are over. You may find that you look forward to your daily or twice daily check-in with God. You may find you have changed in some ways and are on the road to change in other ways.

Of course, prayer is only one part of that journey. When Heschel was questioned for walking down the stairs out of Jewish Theological Seminary to join the civil rights march in Selma, instead of attending that day's afternoon minhah prayer service, he said he was going to pray with his feet.

There are many ways to bring God into our lives. As Jews, we do so by how we count time, how we choose what we eat, and how we treat others. Heschel taught that every act, even walking down a city street, is an opportunity to encounter God and appreciate the miracles of God's presence around us.

Yet prayer has a place, as our holy little Torah breastplate door reminds us of every Shabbat. Prayer is one of the bridges between heaven and earth and the guide to help us bring a little more of heaven down to earth. As Rabbi Heschel explained, "Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of life. Of all sacred acts, first comes prayer..."

Then comes the rest of the journey. So, I hope you will take on this little assignment and let me know how it goes. If in doubt, if you don't feel there is anyone on the other end of the line when you pray, don't be discouraged. Remember the little door on our Torah breastplate, which insists on remaining open all year. It remains open for you, me, and all of our prayers. May our prayers be worthy, and may we become worthy of them, and let us say, Amen.

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