

Those who know me, know that I spend a great deal of time on social media. In the world that we live in, it is a way to communicate what we are feeling, to communicate what is going on in our lives and in this world, with those that we care about, especially when we rarely get to see each other face-to-face. Additionally, we share our thoughts on platforms like Facebook because it is sometimes easier to share what we are feeling in writing. Otherwise, the words may be too difficult to say aloud. This past May, my wife, who sometimes has a hard time sharing with others about the debilitating degenerative neurological disorder, Huntington's Disease, that took my father-in-law's life eight years ago, spent the month writing about it on Facebook. In one post, she wrote about the day we waited to receive the test results to see if he had the disease. You see, we found out while we were dating that her father had the disease, a disease that has a fifty percent of being passed down to children. You either have it or you don't. If you don't, you cannot pass it down to children. If you have enough repeats of the gene though, you are guaranteed that at some point in your life, you will become symptomatic.

She gave me permission to share her words. She posted in a status update: "The morning that we went to meet with the genetic counselor to get my test results, Jesse davened, as he does every morning. I asked him," she wrote, "if he prayed that I would not have HD, and he answered that whether I had Huntington's Disease or not was determined upon my conception, and no amount of prayer would change that result. He told me that he prayed that morning for strength, and for the wisdom of all the doctors and researchers trying to find a cure, and prayed for our life together, whatever it may look like."

I remember every detail of that morning. It was pouring rain. And I remember when the genetic counselor told Andrea that she did not have Huntington's Disease. We made her tell us again because we were convinced we didn't hear her correctly. We cried and cried, and laughed and cried. I insisted that we walk sixty blocks home in the pouring rain because it was such a beautiful day.

And I remember that morning before receiving the test results. I remember struggling to wrap *tefillin*, my hand shaking, wrapping it as tight as possible, desperately trying to feel God's touch, trying to be wrapped up in God's presence. And I remember trying to read the words of the siddur, of the prayer book, but they were all a blur. The words that made sense on most days, that every other morning were a safety net for me, were incoherent at that moment. The words that I regularly found meaning in were completely foreign to me. I opened my mouth and words couldn't come out. My mouth moved. Maybe I mumbled. But nothing made sense in that moment. I cried. I stood there, shaking back and forth, and let out every emotion I could feel. And yes, I asked for strength - because I felt so helpless and hopeless, not having control of our lives or the future. But at that moment, I just needed to pour my heart out. I needed to share my words, and my thoughts, instead of liturgy, instead of words written by others that have been prepared for me to say.

I am sure that each of us has had a similar moment or experience; a moment when we felt helpless and hopeless; a moment when we don't know what to say or who to turn to; a moment when, despite previous claims of doubting God's existence or questioning God's impact on this world, we still find ourselves looking up to the Heavens. Lying in bed at night, or sitting parked in the car all by ourselves, or in the middle of a quiet walk through the reservation, surrounded only by God's creation. There is a reason that the two moments when we are quietest during Rosh Hashanah or any typical Shabbat service is when we recite the words of the *Mi Shebeirach*, a prayer for healing, and during the Mourner's Kaddish, when we are there to be a shoulder to lean on and comfort those who mourn. During moments when we feel helpless and hopeless, that is when we truly pray. That is when we also need to no longer simply rely on another's words to guide us, but instead share the meditations of our hearts.

Just a few moments ago, we read in the Haftarah of Hannah's prayer, praying for a child that she waited for, for so long. At the beginning of the year when we recommit to a relationship with God, we read:

*V'hi Marat nefesh va'titpalel al Adonai uvacho tivkeh. And her soul was bitter, but she continued to pray to God, weeping and wailing... V'haya ki hirb'ta l'hitpalel lifnei Adonai v'Eli Shomer et Piha. V'chana hi midaberet al libah rak sefateha na'ot v'kola lo yishame'a vayachsh'veha Eli l'shikora. And she continued to pray before God and Eli watched her mouth. And Hannah spoke in her heart so that only her mouth moved, but her voice could not be heard. And Eli -- the High Priest and Religious Leader -- thought she was drunk... Vayomer eleha Eli ad Matai tishtakarim Hasiri et Yeinech me'alayich. Va'ta'an chana vayomer Lo Adoni isha Keshat ruach Anochi v'yayin v'Shechar Lo Shatiti va'eshpoch et Nafshi lifnei Adonai. How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself, he asked. Sober up! But Hannah replied. I am not drunk. I am a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have simply been pouring out my heart to God.*

Think about this for a second: we read this on the most spiritual day of the year, as if this is an example of what prayer is supposed to be. And on this day, we see Eli the priest, the Biblical example of the Jewish establishment, the example of rite, ritual, and custom, and tradition, the one who ensures fixed worship, saw someone devoutly praying and assumed that she was under the influence of something. The one who was so focused on fixed prayer couldn't see spontaneous prayer right in front of him. The Haftarah is a metaphor of all metaphors. We read this text on the day that we all come together for a meaningful prayer experience spending hours in services, and yet, we struggle to find meaning in the liturgy, no matter how familiar or foreign the melodies. We search just to stay on the right page and do so for as long as we can until we reward ourselves with a break in the lobby to catch up with a dear friend.

Is it that the liturgy doesn't work for us? Or that it was never supposed to work for us - that the liturgy is Eli the Priest when we, on this holiest of days, are supposed to be pouring our hearts out, are supposed to be struggling like Hannah.

I recently saw a Ted Talk that speaks of the 'God Gap' - the empty space between the concept of God that we were taught as children and the God that we experience -- or don't experience - today. This gap exists because the idea of God that we have as children doesn't resonate and doesn't make sense as adults. We see so much violence, so much disease, so much hate, so much inequality, and so much evil, that we are forced to wonder how any God could be comfortable with creating such a world. In a way, I am envious of such a childish theology, envious of a toddler who sees God's creations in the world, who sees every blade of grass, every snow flurry, every ray of sunshine, as a miracle of God, appreciating God's presence in this world. The longer we live in this reality, the harder that it is to do.

The more we are consumed by headlines of war, of terrorism, of hatred and bigotry, the more we mourn the loss of a loved one taken from this world far too soon, the more we comfort our loved ones who are so righteous and yet innocently suffering from illness, the harder it is for us to appreciate God's presence. Living in this reality may force some to question God's existence. For me, living in this reality causes us to depend on God more, to look to God for strength, for understanding, for focus, to get through each day. As Rabbi Harold Kushner teaches, living in this reality causes us to see God as the calm in the chaos.

To shrink this God gap, we need to first appreciate God's presence. Please don't misunderstand me. We aren't supposed to have it all figured out. And it is perfectly okay to wrestle with God and question our relationship with God. That too is a part of this moment. But we must begin by acknowledging God. Like our Biblical patriarch Jacob, who awakens from his dream and declares *Adonai B'Makom Hazeah v'Anochi, Lo Yadati*, that "God was in this place and I did not know it," we too have to begin by saying that God is here. This moment in time, this time of renewal, begins by appreciating the divine nature of this moment, the divine spark within those with whom we surround ourselves. Once we can say that God is in this place, even if we previously did not know it, or previously did not appreciate it, then we can begin shrinking this God gap.

We need to not only talk about God more, we need to talk about God differently. I would add that we need to begin talking about God, period. As I like to say, we as a community daven a lot, but don't pray enough. We daven. We have a robust core of regulars who gather every morning for our daily minyan. We have an ever increasing and growing crowd that joins us weekly for Shabbat services. We stick to the formulaic nature of liturgy, but how often do we really pray?

Because prayer ultimately is supposed to be an experience of personal revelation, an experience of personal transformation. We are meant to re-experience Mount Sinai -the thunder and lightning; the fire; the loud noises; the earth shaking. And we are also meant to experience what Elijah the Prophet felt on Mount Carmel, when we are taught that God was not present in that thunder and lightning and fire and earthquakes, but instead, present in the

silence. If prayer is about personal transformation, then we don't talk to God to try to change God; we talk to God to try to change our own selves.

But we don't talk about prayer because if we did, then we'd have to address the fact that we don't feel comfortable in prayer. Is it that we are unsatisfied with the results of our prayer experiences? Is it that we feel betrayed by the lack of sea splitting miracles in our lives? Is it that we have given up after petition after petition has seemingly been ignored? Or is it that we expect prayer, and we expect our relationship with God, to be clear? We like to think we live in a world that is black and white, but we live in a complicated world. Maybe our relationship with God then is also supposed to be complicated.

To address this complicated world, and to try and make sense of our complicated lives, we need to understand our complicated relationships with God. In the Midrash of *Genesis Rabbah*, we learn that there are a multitude of partners in creation, there could be no child without a parent's commitment to raise that child, but there also would be no child without God. The Midrash puts us on equal footing with God, as if we are just as responsible for this world as God is. What makes so many of us so uncomfortable about God and prayer is our relationship with God in a fixed prayer setting. *Avinu Malkeinu*, we sing. Our parent. Our sovereign. How do we pray to a God that is up here when we are down here? On Rosh Hashanah, how do we pray to a God that is judge, jury, prosecution, and defense? The conversation is an impossible one to have because that relationship is an impossible one to fathom.

In order to redefine that relationship, we need to rewrite the script. Literally. We need to change our focus from liturgy to experience, from words said by us to words written by us. The Mishnah (*Mishnah Berachot 4:4*) is pretty clear: one who makes prayer a fixed task is one whose prayer is no supplication. Essentially, one who only says the words of a prayer book, words written by another, is one who has not prayed at all.

It was late at night that Jacob wrestled with God, or an angel, or himself, in the Torah. The text clearly states (Gen. 32:25), *Vayevater Yaakov Levado*. "And Jacob was left alone." He was all by himself. All alone, with only his thoughts. Being with others was an easy way to distract him from thinking about what weighed on him heavily. But being alone, being alone with his thoughts is when he was truly able to be with God. It was at that moment he was finally able to wrestle. And that's all that is expected of us: to wrestle.

As meaningful as it is to come together as community, we also acknowledge that it prevents us from being alone. Community is an essential part of the Jewish experience, and can be a meaningful addition to the Jewish spiritual experience. Yet, it also can be a barrier to our need to divinely wrestle. So our goal in the new year is to celebrate with community, but also make time for yourself. Be alone. Be alone with yourself and be alone with God. We must do a lot more than just recite words. We need to be comfortable with our discomfort. We need to do more than just sing. We need to laugh with God and cry with God. We need to yell at God and

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curse at God. And we need to thank God for the blessings of everyday that we too often overlook. We need to wrestle with God.

Let us be brave enough and willing to search for God, and celebrate with God in the year ahead. Let us spend this time of year, these days of reflection and awe, and this year to come, saying exactly what Hannah said: *v'eshpoch et Nafshi lifnei Adonai*. Let us pour out our souls to God. Let us be willing to let God into our lives. Let us wrestle with God. And may we find God, and truly find ourselves, in the process. *Shana Tova*.