

Kol Nidre 5768
Tefillah -- Let the World Take Your Breath Away
Rabbi Sharon Brous

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Arik Frankenthal was a 19-year-old Israeli soldier in the summer of 1994, on his way home to see his family when he was kidnapped by members of Hamas. For several days his family and the country held their breath as they searched for him, desperate for a sign that he was alive. Finally, in the middle of the night, there was a knock at the Frankenthal's door. Arik's father, Yitzhak, opened the door and saw three generals standing before him, the requisite number for a *beit din* -- a Jewish legal court. He immediately knew what this meant. But before they could even tell him that they had found the body of his beloved son, his "tall blue-eyed golden-haired son who was always smiling with the innocence of a child and the understanding of an adult," Yitzhak had the following thought: *Thank you, God, for blessing me with 19 years with this angel on earth.* His beloved son was murdered by terrorists, and his first thought was an expression of gratitude for the blessing of his life.

Years later, Yitzhak explained: *I understood in that instant why I had been praying three times a day my whole life. It was all preparation for that moment.* Over the course of a lifetime he had built a consciousness that allowed him to grieve with gratitude.

On Rosh Hashanah we talked about Rav Amnon of Mainz, the brilliant young 10th century rabbi who was brutally tortured at the hands of the Bishop of Mainz when he refused to convert to Christianity. We talked about how on Rosh Hashanah, Rav Amnon was carried to shul and placed on the bimah where he called out, with his dying breath: *who will live and who will die?* Those spontaneous, penetrating questions -- whispered on the cusp of death -- became the text of the most intense and profound piece of liturgy for the High Holy Days: *Unetaneh Tokef*. With this prayer, we are awakened to the impermanence and capriciousness of life -- the reality that we cannot control history, and that we, or those we love, might not be here for Kol Nidre next year. But we are not left to despair. Instead, we are charged to live lives of purpose, meaning and celebration, lives of *teshuvah*, *tefillah* and *tzedakah*. On Rosh Hashanah we explored the first of the three -- *teshuvah* -- the possibility of personal transformation and healing. Tonight we will focus on the second, *tefillah* -- prayer. Tomorrow we will explore the third -- *tzedakah*, the pursuit of justice.

Really, you ask? Really, *prayer* is considered one of the three essential dimensions of a meaningful life? How is that so, when so few Jews have ever even had a meaningful Jewish prayer experience in their lives. How is that so, when forces of the Jewish institutional world seem to conspire to take away from us any meaningful connection to prayer by making prayer in so many congregations about sitting passively while professionals put on interminable mediocre performances, leaving us 3 hours older and none the wiser than we were when we came in? How is that so, when prayer is so often the most banal, most uninspired aspect of the Jewish experience, when so many congregants feel like they need to suffer through the prayer part just to get to the sermons, when so many of my rabbi friends say they have to daven before their own services because there surely is no room for

real prayer in their synagogues. How is that so when the siddur, the prayerbook, feels inaccessible, unalterable, static -- everything that we as human beings are trying so hard not to be?

But our tradition teaches that the paucity of challenging, inspiring outlets for Jewish spiritual engagement cannot be used as an excuse to prevent the spirit from soaring. Yitzhak Frankenthal achieved what Rav Amnon was talking about -- prayer that is life sustaining, even in the darkest of moments. How can *we* create space for a life of the spirit that will challenge, comfort, sustain, inspire?

I'd like to offer, tonight, the possibility that deep soulful prayer, prayer worth staking your life on, prayer that makes life worth living, is rooted in two things that every one of us can access: heartache and gratitude.

The Talmud cryptically teaches that a person must enter through two doors in the synagogue, when going to pray.¹ What are these two doors? 1500 years later, the Hassidim² teach that the first is **בְּשֵׁב יְלִי נִבְרָא הָעוֹלָם** -- *for my sake the world was created*. In order to even enter into Jewish prayer, we have to believe that it is all up to us -- that if we don't find the courage and the time to care, nobody will. That if we don't stand up and speak out against homophobia, Anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, racism, sexism, all the isms that continue to plague our society, if we don't stand up and stand strong against the hatred that is the seed of violence in our society, nobody will. That if we don't stand up and scream out against the complacency, the apathy that is the peril of our day and the cornerstone of our society, with its message of aggressive indifference -- if we don't do something to bring about a radical cultural shift, nobody will. And our children will grow up in a world of vast human and environmental degradation, of cultural chasms and spiritual anorexia. In order to even walk into the room to pray, we have to take ourselves seriously.

And we have to be outraged. Our hearts have to break. We have to look at Nina Berman's photographs of Iraq war veterans, especially *Marine Wedding* -- the picture of Ty Zeigel, a 24 year old former Marine sergeant standing beside his beloved -- his childhood sweetheart -- on their wedding day. She, 21, is dressed in her wedding gown and holds a bouquet of flowers, but her expression is grave. Though one could never know for sure, she appears to be terrified. We have to look at Zeigel, standing at her side in his marine uniform, expressionless because the flesh melted off his face when he was trapped in a burning truck after a suicide bomber's attack two years earlier. "His shattered skull was replaced by a plastic dome, and a face was constructed more or less from scratch with salvaged tissue, holes left where his ears and nose had been."³ We have to consider that this marine is surely one of the lucky ones for surviving, though now he and his wife will have to spend the rest of their lives -- as everyone who sees them shudders and whispers *is that a man?* -- trying to understand what good came of his sacrifice.

We have to look at the image of Luis Calderon, the 22 year old former High School football star who ended up with a severed spinal cord, leaving him a quadriplegic, after he complied with orders to pull down a concrete wall in Baghdad. Why? Because the wall had a mural of Saddam Hussein painted on it. Calderon will never use his arms or legs again -- the great achievement that he and his wife now celebrate is the fact that he has figured out, using an arm brace, how to move the joystick on a motorized wheelchair.

1 Talmud Bavli, Brakhot 8a.

2 Sefer Kol Mevasser, Parashat Bereishit.

3 NYTimes "Words Unspoken are Rendered on War's Faces," Aug. 22, 2007.

We have to look at these photos and be outraged.

We have to hear the stories of the more than 300 Iraqi civilians⁴ who have been killed over just these *aseret yemei teshuvah* -- since Erev Rosh Hashanah -- the family of three that was shot dead in their car in Baquba, the dozens killed in car bombs, truck bombs, by suicide bombers and roadside bombs. We have to think about the Iraqi parents who wonder each morning as they send their children to school if this will be the last time they see them. We have to remember the vast number of broken families -- mourning the loss of loved ones and afraid to even perform burials lest they themselves become targets of more attacks.

We have to allow ourselves to feel the tragedy in these stories, and we have to believe that if we don't do something about it, nobody will! The first door is the ultimate assertion of human adequacy. It is we who must take responsibility for the brokenness of our world. It is we who must demand a return to sanity, it is we who must call for human dignity and honor, justice and peace. It is we who must experience heartache.

And what is the second door?

The second door is *אני עפר ואפר* -- *I am but dust and ashes* -- the words that Abraham famously said to God when negotiating over the fate of Sodom and Gemorrah. I know that my entire life is but a speck of dust on the map of time. My personal triumphs and failures, my struggles and concerns, in the end, are but a grain of sand upon life's shore.

This door is the door of recognition of the enormity, the vast beauty of the world. This is the door that liberates us from the confines of our own stories, and opens us up to the possibility of the miraculous in our world. This door is often pushed open by the sunset. Viktor Frankl writes of his experience in a death camp:

One evening, when we were already resting on the floor of our hut, dead tired, soup bowls in hand, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to the assembly grounds and see the wonderful sunset. Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colors, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate grey mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, "How beautiful the world could be."⁵

The second door is the door of recognition of the grandness, the power, mystery and majesty of the world. We have to look beyond all the ways in which we feel devastated by what we don't have, and we have to celebrate what we do have. We have to wake up in the morning and despite the fact that we are not yet everything we want to be, we have to be grateful for what we are. We have to have the clarity and the vision to see beyond our own brokenness -- in fact, to allow our brokenness to open us up to the light and beauty of the world.

We have to let life take us by surprise. I recently spoke with an elderly man who had lost his best friend and business partner, the man with whom he had survived Auschwitz, the person he had eaten lunch with every day for the past 60 years since they came to the United States after the war. Though the man who had died was 89 years old, his death came quite suddenly, which compounded

4 See <http://www.iraqbodycount.org/database/recent/>.

5 Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, p. 51.

the loss for his family and friends. “I understand that this came as quite a surprise” I said to the mourning friend. “Surprise? What’s the surprise in dying? The surprise is in living!” I guess after living through Auschwitz, its not hard to sense the surprise in waking up alive every morning.

We have to look at the relationships in our lives, our partners, our friends, our parents and children and siblings, as gifts and blessings. We have to recognize that to find love, in the midst of the enormous chaos of our world, is the greatest gift one could receive. We have to be stunned by the ability to laugh, even through pain. We have to be amazed, radically amazed, by life. We have to not let the fact that something could be scientifically explained, medically verified or politically justified mitigate the element of surprise. We have to approach the world every day with a sense of awe and wonder.

Rabbi Eddie Feinstein so beautifully articulated that for Heschel, “the opposite of religion is not doubt or disbelief or secularity. The opposite of religion is boredom.” It is disengagement. It is the unwillingness to look at the world and find anything worthy of either your outrage or your gratitude. It is to refuse to be surprised by the grandeur of life -- “*it is to witness the sunset and just push down the car’s sunvisor without a moment of amazement and wonder.*”⁶ It is wakefulness to heartache and gratitude, these two doors, reflecting two consciousnesses, that are the starting point for prayer. When is the last time you stopped what you were doing in the middle of the day to weep over a story you read in the paper? To feel, in your kishkas, the profound pain suffered by another human being? To marvel, with all your heart, over the gift of a functioning body? The mystery of love?

It’s ok to start with the self -- what are the greatest blessings and deepest concerns of my life? But the Jewish spiritual existence cannot be mired in the privacy of one’s personal concerns. Heschel warns that “Even the palm of one hand may bar the light of the entire sun.”⁷ The Jewish spiritual path is about the journey from narrowness to expansiveness, from parochialism to universalism. There is a famous depiction of the Hindu god Shiva Nata Raja dancing in a ring of bronze flames. One of his feet is lifted into the air; the other rests on the back of a little man, crouched down to the ground, intently focused on a leaf he is holding. Joseph Campbell, scholar of religion and mythology, explained that the little man represents a “person who is so caught up in the minutia of the material world that he doesn’t even know that the living God is dancing on his back.”⁸ How many of us are so consumed with our lives that we don’t even notice the presence of God in our midst? The Jewish spiritual existence is about looking up from the leaf, looking beyond the palm of the hand, and seeing a world of beauty and a world on fire.

If nothing about the world takes your breath away -- if you believe that the world is entirely comprehensible, if you don’t shutter at the grandeur of nature, if you find yourself left speechless neither by the sheer majesty, nor the sheer inhumanity of life, then a spiritual life will elude you. If your heart is closed to the cries of those who suffer -- in our families, in our community, in our public hospitals, in Falluja and Baghdad, in Sderot and in Gaza, if the news makes your eyes gloss over with existential boredom, if the world makes you yawn, and every breath of life is but a reminder of everything you don’t have, if you have never felt the need to cry out *ma gadlu ma’asekha ya* how awesome are Your creations! -- sitting through two hours of services tonight will not help you.

6 Feinstein, Rabbi Eddie, “A Legacy of Wonder.”

7 Heschel, Rabbi Abraham Joshua, *Man’s Quest for God*, p. 7.

8 See Remen, Dr. Rachel Naomi, *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, p. 80.

But you have the capacity to achieve all of this.

For some of us it is not easy to express the longing of our hearts. We are too ambivalent, too rational, too cynical, too smart. That's why we sang Amazing Grace tonight. What happened to your heart when Jaclyn and Jessica started to sing? Was there a part of you that wanted to weep, to sing out, to stand up and grab someone's hand? Was there a part of you that felt awake and alive? I had us sing Amazing Grace tonight because it is one of the most evocative songs I know -- a song that we all get, viscerally, is a prayer. A song that elevates, despite our ambivalence about the nature or even existence of God, beyond our embarrassment, our cynicism. Part of the Jewish problem with prayer is the misperception that prayer is about the perfect recitation of Hebrew words in perfectly pitched harmonies by people of perfect faith. But that's not what prayer is. Prayer is the deepest expression of the soul, something every single person can access and express. I know that for all of us there is a space for hoping, for believing, for longing, for thanking.

Rabbi Kalonymous Kalman Shapiro, the Rabbi of the Warsaw Ghetto, taught that sometimes we achieve prayer accidentally and spontaneously, through song. He taught that it is music that arouses the spirit, opens us up, allows us to reach beyond reason and cry out from the depths of our heart. Did you not feel it when we sang tonight?

A few months after I became a rabbi, a terrible tragedy occurred in my congregation in New York. An active member of the synagogue, a junior in college, was crossing the street in Harvard Square after finishing a final exam when she was struck by a car and left in critical condition for a week, with little chance of survival. The whole community was paralyzed and devastated. "What can we do?" I asked my rabbi. "Pray," he said. "Pray with all your heart. Pray as if there is no such thing as a medical certainty. Pray as if anything is possible. Pray without ambivalence. Pray without doubt in God's capacity to heal. Pray as if the whole world depends on your prayers." That Shabbes, I closed my eyes and sang out with all of my heart. Halfway through Kabbalat Shabbat, I realized that I was no longer singing -- I was praying. I was soaring. That experience changed my life. It is when I realized that prayer can be a moment in which we suspend doubt and disbelief, in which we allow ourselves to hope and to believe that anything is possible. Since then, I don't sing; I pray. Since then, I pray as though my prayers could truly pierce the heavens and bring peace to Israel, a land drenched in blood and promise. I pray as though my prayers could put an end to the suffering caused by this disastrous war in Iraq. I pray as though my prayers could awaken compassion for those in our community who need healing, comfort, direction. Since then, I pray as though the whole world rests on my prayers. These prayers, which come from the deepest place of my angst and wonder pour out of me through song. Do you know the famous saying from Zimbabwe: *if you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing?* Heschel taught that though you may not [yet] be able to pray, you can [surely] sing. And song leads to prayer.⁹

What made it possible for Yitzhak Frankenthal to recognize, in the moment of his son's death, the great blessing of his life? He had spent a lifetime cultivating a humble awareness of the gift of life,

9 Heschel, "The Vocation of the Cantor," p. 247.

of the majesty of the world, of the presence and possibility of love. It doesn't mean that loss isn't excruciating, it means that a life of humble gratitude places loss in a context of meaning. It means that even in the darkest and busiest moments, our hearts are open to beauty and possibility. This is the essence of prayer. It means that we are able, in the words of Netivot Shalom, to transcend the constriction of vision that prevents us both from seeing the vast possibilities of the world, and seeing our own essential role in transforming reality.¹⁰

After Heschel suffered a debilitating heart attack in his mid-50's, one of his students came to visit him in his apartment in Manhattan where he was recovering. Heschel spoke slowly, with much difficulty, almost whispering. "When I regained consciousness," he said, "my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. "Take me, O Lord," I thought. "I have seen so many miracles in my lifetime." Heschel paused, exhausted by those few sentences, and then went on: "That is what I meant when I wrote: `I did not ask for success. I asked for wonder. And you gave it to me.'"¹¹

Perhaps it was that wonder that led Heschel, a brand plucked from the fires of Europe,¹² one of the few in his large family to survive the war, to respond to life by devoting himself to the struggle for civil and economic rights and an end to the Vietnam War.

Perhaps it was the same clarity of vision, the same insight into humanity and God that led Yitzhak Frankenthal to respond to his son Arik's murder not with calls for revenge, but with the establishment of the Israeli-Palestinian Bereaved Families Forum -- a group of Jews, Muslims and Christians who have lost loved ones in the conflict who dialogue, support one another and work toward peace. Perhaps it was Heschel and Frankenthal's prayerfulness -- their ability both to feel pain and to recognize exquisite blessings, that gave them the moral courage to respond to turmoil, tragedy and chaos by building the possibility of peace.

Millions of Jews around world have come to services tonight -- what will happen to us? Will we be open to hearing the call of the spirit, the call of the Divine, the demand that we open our hearts to a deeper sensitivity to the soul, to the world? How can you wake up to heartache and gratitude? What will break you open this year? Will it be the loss of a parent? The awareness of your own vulnerability? The end of a relationship? A new beginning? I pray that we find the time, the courage and the insight to sing out in heartache and gratitude, and that this mystical combination will awaken in us something truly profound. I pray that we grab hold of the promise of *tefillah*, that we sing with all our hearts and pray with all our souls; that we, tonight, pierce right through the gates of Heaven.

10 Netivot Shalom *Teshuvah* 4:3

11 As told by Rabbi Rob Scheinberg, United Synagogue of Hoboken, Sept. 21, 1998.

12 This is how Heschel described himself.