

Rosh Hashanah Day 2
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We Can Become One if We Try

Shana Tova. It is good to see you all again. Together on Rosh Hashanah.

I want to share something that might be sacrilegious to some of you. Last November I took off Thanksgiving. No turkey... no family... no driving through Staten Island traffic to get to New Jersey. Instead, Aaron and I went on a babymoon.

Aside from reading, we engaged in one activity. We completed a 1000 piece jigsaw puzzle that featured vintage candy bar wrappers. It was rewarding when we were done. But do you want to know what was not rewarding? Those last few hours when we had not yet finished the puzzle and thought that perhaps pieces were missing. Did this ever happen to you? I kept thinking of Theodor Herzl who said *Im tirzu, ein zo agada*, if you will it, it is no fairy tale. I wanted all the pieces to unite, together. It took time, but eventually they did, and a delicious chocolaty image appeared, making me long for Junior Mints and Hershey Bars.

The pieces we placed in the puzzle were red and yellow and blue and green and white and black and brown. Some had bits of red and yellow. Some had bits of yellow and blue. Some had yellow and red and brown. Some pieces shared colors and others were completely distinct. But when all the pieces were finally placed together, a singular - and delicious - picture was created. The sum of all of 1000 pieces created the whole. All together, they created one image.

One.

A lot of different parts came together, fit with each other, to become one.

Halevai that the same could be said for the Jewish people today. Instead the Jewish community is divided on so many issues, and the rhetoric has never been as ugly as it is now. Opposing voices are being raised in the public arena, not just the Jewish press.

Lack of unity in the Jewish community is disheartening. On the other hand, when we can be a single people, despite our differences, we are filled with hope.

The Jerusalem Talmud tells us "Just as no two physical appearances are the same, similarly, no two opinions are the same." The expression "two Jews, three opinions" comes from somewhere... Our tradition teaches us about *makhloket l'shem shamayim*, a dispute for Heaven's sake -- but that is not the form of public discourse we see right

now. Our tradition also teaches that Eilu v'eilu divrei Elohim chaim" (these and these are the words of the living God, all opinions are the words of God) --- but it is not the word of God when individuals and organizations are attacked from within.

Our tradition believes and values that many opinions can exist at the same time on a particular subject. Our most popular commentator Rashi nearly always interpreted verses in the Torah differently than Ibn Ezra. The Talmud is a multi volume book which is full of argumentation. We must engage in private and public debate and dialogue with each other. We all have the right to our opinion, as God did create us with free choice, but the rhetoric is getting uglier and nastier and it feels as if battle lines are being drawn. Some of us need to learn, and others must relearn, how to disagree strongly while showing love as well as kavod, respect to people who disagree with us.

Let's review some of the larger issues that are currently dividing the Jewish people.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran. Is it a good deal or a bad deal for America, for Israel or for globalization? As in all synagogues this morning, there are people sitting in this room who are passionate about both sides of this deeply existential issue.

Israel. Some think Israel is an ugly occupier while others look to Israel with hope, and relate to it as the miraculous answer to anti-Semitism, and as a beacon of democracy in a tumultuous Middle East.

American Politics. In this room, like in every sacred space where Jews gather today, there are card carrying Republicans and Democrats and Independents. And within these party alliances, classic Republican voters and Democratic voters are currently subdivided into who they want as their presidential candidate.

I could stand here all morning discussing how the Jewish people are currently divided and subdivided, but instead I want you to take a leap with me this morning.

Imagine that we are all jigsaw puzzle pieces that can fit together to create one image. I want us to focus on the one thing that the entire Jewish people can accomplish together, to the single thing which will re-unite us. We need it and we owe it to ourselves. We need healing.

Each of us, to the best of our ability, can **pray**. We don't even need this user friendly machzor to do it. All of us can pray. Individually, in groups of ten people, in gatherings like this, and gatherings ten times the size, we can pray. Prayer is not something that other people do, it is not reserved for Jews who look a certain way or who speak a certain way. We all can pray. I hope that since you are here on the second day of Rosh Hashanah, you believe that too.

In an article last year, Andrew W.K., who answers an advice column in the Village Voice, received this question:

Hey, Andrew.

....I'm going to make this short and to the point. My older brother was diagnosed with cancer last week. My whole family is...trying to deal with the news. Everyone is trying to find different ways to help, but something my grandmother said has really got me angry. She said we should all just "pray for my brother," like prayer would actually save his life. Just thinking about it now makes my fists clench with frustration. We need to actively help my brother and do actual things to save him, not kneeling on the ground and mumbling superstitious nonsense. I got into a fight with my grandmother and the rest of my family about this and now I feel worse than ever. I need to get them to see that praying and religious mumbo jumbo doesn't help. How do I explain this to them? Thanks for reading this, Not Gonna Pray

Andrew's response was as follows-

Dear Not Gonna Pray,

I'm deeply sorry to hear about your brother's diagnosis. I'm sending you my thoughts, and my heart goes out to your brother and your whole family. Guess what? That was me praying for you. I think the idea of "praying" is a lot less complicated, a lot more powerful, and a little different than you may realize. In fact, I'll bet you're already praying all the time and just don't realize it. (And then he goes on)

I remember the first time reading the article and wanting Andrew W.K., Jewish or not, to be one of my Rabbis. There was so much wisdom in his words. Andrew believed, like I believe that prayer is not only about the words in the machzor. It **can't** be, in fact, because every published machzor is different. Some have more prayers and some have less; depending on the customs of the community. This Lev Shalem has more commentary and explanation than the silver Harlow machzor. The language of the Harlow, especially in English, was clearer than the black Silverman. Some machzorim include much more poetry. Some have gender neutral language. Some machzorim include illustrations. It does not really matter because whether we open our machzor or not, we can unite by our prayers.

We may have walked into this Sanctuary with polarizing ideas about the outside world. Some of you might have walked without knowing a single word of Hebrew. In spite of that, because we are all here, we can unite together with our prayers, and become one this morning. If we all pray this morning, then we create an even playing field.

In the Talmud, Rabbi Eliezer said: If a person prays only according to the exact fixed prayer and adds nothing from his own mind, his prayer is not considered proper. (Brachot 28a). Already two thousand years ago the rabbis were preaching about spending time in your seat in shul outside of the machzor. Wherever our thoughts go

today with private requests, moments of gratitude and legitimate complaints, if we direct these thoughts to God, then we will all pray together.

The prayers that we have received from our ancestors are important and set the tone for the solemnity of starting a new year. It is very powerful to say *Adonai Adonai El Rachum v'Chanum* (God you are gracious and compassionate) when the Holy Ark is open for the Torah service. It is appropriate to say *Hayom Harat Olam* (Today the world stands as at birth) after we hear each set of shofar blasts in the Musaf Amida, reminding us to wake up and make some new starts with the new year. The machzor is a book of poetry, petitions, gratitude and requests of God.

But the ancient rabbis knew we were human beings with hearts and souls and personal yearnings and desires. They taught us to value both *keva* —the fixed structure of the liturgy and prayers that we have inherited, and the power of *kavannah* —spontaneous, inner devotion. Both are integral parts of personal and communal Jewish prayer. When we pray, both are necessary.

From where I stand, I see a rainbow of people sitting in the pews. I am blessed to know many of you well. You all look different from one another and have diverse interests, concerns, passions, fears and expertise. The person sitting next you might differ with you regarding numerous political and social issues, but you have something in common with your neighbor. You both can pray; you both can talk to God. You can thank God or you can tell God how angry and sad and lonely you are. Everyone can partake in that.

Prayer is for all of us. When we daven this morning, we connect ourselves to every other Jew who is praying today. Prayer is powerful, and it should not be in the domain of the clergy only. We can **all** do it.

Frequently I receive phone calls or emails or people stop me at Kiddush and say: Rabbi, can you say a misheberach or say a prayer for me? I bite my tongue because I know it gives people comfort to know the rabbi is praying for them, but what I really want to say is talk to God yourself. My conversation with God is no better than yours. We are always on an even playing field. Take your lead from some guy named Andrew who writes for the Village Voice. "Prayer is not *complicated*" he writes. When a spouse sits in the hospital waiting room and repeats "oh God, let her be ok" that is also praying.

While there is a schedule for fixed prayer, there is no timetable for spontaneous prayer (hence it is spontaneous). "God remains close, even when we become distant," wrote Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook. If we came here today, feeling distant from God, or feeling phony, or feeling disconnected, or feeling like you don't belong, or somehow feeling different or somehow feeling other-- **don't**. You can pray just like the person sitting next to you, the person behind you, and the person six rows away. And when we all pray, we will connect and feel closer and feel real.

Singing is not praying. They are two very different activities. We can all sing or hum along to Avinu Malkeinu. We can all sing along to Chadash Yameinu Kkedem and we can all sing along to Aleinu. But singing is not praying. Praying is when you mean it. Praying is when the words come alive and make you cry.

So, during the very long silent Amidah of Musaf which we will begin as soon as I finish speaking today, I invite, I encourage, I deeply want us all to try to pray together. This year, do not participate in the massive exodus after my sermon. **Stay a little longer.** If the words on the page don't work for you, talk to God **however you can.** But, you need to mean it. Put your tallit over your head if you must. Use your heart. Use your soul. Leave your chair and stand in a corner if you need more space. Cry. Talk to God. Ask. Thank. Acknowledge. Praise.

We can all do it.

Our souls and our thoughts will reach God together. And for a brief moment on Rosh Hashanah, when God is looking very closely at His people, (Ki anu Amecha, v'ata Eloheinu, because we are your people, and you are our God), He will see them together, as one.

Not fighting. Not yelling. Not name calling. Not writing op-eds.

God will look down and see us, one complete puzzle. But more than that, as we do our own davening, our own praying in whatever way we choose, we will feel the power of that unity as well.

Shana tova