

The Call and Response of Prayer

August 12, 2016

Shabbat Shalom!

As many of you know I have a toddler - Zeev Lucca. He is a little over 2 years. Just recently I realized that he moved into a new stage of language acquisition. Initially he was all about parroting my words. I would model speech and he would imitate it. Do you want milk Zeev? And he would say back, Milk. But recently he has begun initiating our conversations. The other day we were biking in West Philly and he asked me "Where are we going" That is perhaps his favorite new refrain. I told him we are going home. "Where are home?" he asked. (He hasn't yet learned the full conjugation of the verb to be). In this moment I did not entertain the existential question present in the heart of my 2 year old who just moved across state lines. I told him, "2 more blocks." "2 more blocks" he repeated. "2 more blocks" "2 more blocks". Until finally I realized he was waiting for me to respond and I repeated back to him, yes 2 more blocks. And with that, he moved on to his next string of questions.

But I paused. For me something clicked. It wasn't enough that he had learned to ask questions and even begun to understand my answers. It wasn't just the back and forth of words that allowed him to feel heard, he needed me to reflect back that I had heard the exact words he had spoken. I find toddlers have a way of making transparent fundamental human desires. Don't we all want to just double-check that someone actually, honestly, heard us.

This is perhaps the challenge and wisdom of prayer. It is perhaps even why we are all here tonight.

This is the beginning of many conversations we will have about prayer. The whats and whys of spiritual practice. Consider this an invitation. Since many of our gathering moments will include, if not be centered around prayer. I hope we can together investigate what we are doing when we pray so that it can become an increasingly meaningful and accessible practice.

In my experience, prayer has the potential to be very awkward. The choreography alone is mysterious. When do we bow? When to rise, when to sit, and why? Many of us are uncomfortable with the sound of our own voices. Nevermind lost in the Hebrew, even transliterated, sea of words. What is it in fact that we are saying, why and to whom?

One of my teachers tells this story about prayer: A person is walking through Grand Central Station, let's call it 30th Street for cultural relevance. She is a pious Jew and feels herself obligated to pray 3 times a day and in the right moments. People are rushing all around her. Suddenly she catches the clock and realizes it is time to pray the afternoon prayer. She looks around, considers huddling in a corner or locking herself in a bathroom stall. But then she sees a small phone booth, superman style - this was pre-iphone. She wanders to it, steps inside, and closes the door behind her. Picks up the phone and begins to mumble her prayers. And the camera zooms out.

Why, my teacher asked, does she pick up the phone? (Any answers?)

Does she want privacy? Is she concerned someone might question why she is in the phone booth? Does she really think someone's on the other line? Is someone really on the other line?

For me this story foregrounds the question, who or what is on the receiving end of our prayers? And even more so, what allows us to open our hearts and feel heard?

While we often call God - Shomea Tefillah, The one who hears prayers
The structure of our service, and theology that it teaches us,
suggests that we are also the ones who hear and affirm each other's
prayers

Built into the structure of our liturgy is the call and response of community

What are some prayers that involve a Call and Response?

(List all the prayers that have that element)

Kaddish - Yehei Shmei Raba

Kedusha - Holy Holy Holy

Priestly Blessing -Ken Yehi Ratzon

Torah Service Aliyah

And certainly the Amen at the end of so many blessings.

Even more so, the Talmud teaches that the person who says Amen to another person's blessing receives a greater reward than the one who said the blessing to begin with.

The Amen is our personal and communal affirmation to one another's experiences, to our longings and our gratitude. It is our expression of

allyship, as one Kol Tzedek member put it in an email this week. It is this very sense of allyship, of camaraderie that I hope prayer encourages.

On Thursday night of last week we entered into the new month of Av. Av is a month of sadness in the midst of destruction, yet it also contains within it the seeds of hope. The beginning of Av introduces the “nine days,” which culminates in the ninth day of the Hebrew month Av, or in Hebrew, Tish’a b’Av, a 25-hour fast, observed from this Saturday night through Sunday night.

It began as a mournful remembrance of the historical event of the destruction of the Temple by the Babylonians. It has become the container for our communal grief, loss and suffering - mythic, historic, personal and political. It is a time to cry out, “How” can this be?

Our tradition teaches that the temple was destroyed not because of any singular event, but because of *sinat hinam* - widespread hatred and divisiveness. Divinity was unable to dwell in a culture of fear and violence.

The community you all have cultivated here at Kol Tzedek is precious, it is a sacred antidote to everything that is *sinat hinam*, oppressive hatred. Kol Tzedek is built upon a spirit of kindness and generosity. We come here for “services” - but more so I imagine that we each come for connection and witnessing.

We are all that pious person racing around and realizing we need a moment to stop and express our gratitude, our fear, or longing. Our time together on Shabbat is a magic phone booth. It is a place we can ask “How” can it be - about our personal struggles with infertility, with family

members, with addiction, with healing from trauma. And it is a place that we can ask How can it be - with racism, with poverty, with a failing education system. And we can do so knowing that we are all on the other end of the line. Even amidst our political differences, let us be mindful that we take the time to truly listen and hear and affirm one another. To say Amen in our hearts - to offer blessing of compassion and goodness to everyone else present.

As we rise for Barechu, what we typically refer to as “the call to prayer” - let us hear in it not just the sound of the call, but the resonant and robust response that we bring to it. Allow yourself to be held by the spontaneous choir we have created, as the voices of our community encourage you to open your heart and give language to the unspeakable joy, hope and suffering that is uniquely yours. When in doubt, allow the silence to fill you as you say Amen to the prayers and blessings of those around you.

Ken Yehi Ratzon - May it be so.