

A Prayer for the Afternoon

Yizkor, Yom Kippur 5774

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If there is a scene that tells the story of mincha, the afternoon prayer, it is well-known by anyone who has spent an extended amount of time in Israel where, inevitably, you'll see, on Highway One between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv around sunset, some cars pulled over by the side of the road. As cars and buses and trucks roar by, people face towards Jerusalem davening mincha, the afternoon prayer, before the sun goes down over the Mediterranean behind them.

Mincha is a simple offering. Fine flour, oil and salt made in a pan or a griddle or an oven (Leviticus 2). No leaven. No honey. Nothing fancy. Nothing sweet.

The service is as simple as it gets. One of the things I like about Judaism is the way it balances between the world of the spirit and the our practical needs. The rabbis say: אין גזרין בה לא יכול לעמוד בה גזירה שהציבור לא יוכל לעמוד בה which means something like, "We may not decree something that the community cannot practically obey." And in Jewish law, there are terms like טירחא דציבורא (a burden on the community) and הפסד מרובה (a great financial loss) which are moderating terms; if things are too burdensome for the community or a particular practice is too costly, those are factors that can change the outcome of a Jewish legal decision. Well, mincha – the weekday afternoon service – is short. The full liturgy includes Ashrei (Psalm 145) as a one psalm "warm up," the Amidah, the central Jewish prayer (which can be abbreviated in a variety of ways if necessary), Full Kaddish, Aleinu and mourner's kaddish. When there is a minyan, the service can take 10 to 15 minutes tops; when said alone, it can take just a couple of minutes. The service mirrors the mincha offering of flour, salt and oil. Nothing fancy. Nothing sweet. I think the rabbis kept it short for a reason: because by the time the day gets going, we're busy! Work! Family! Errands! Who has time for more? The word "Mincha" is not quite "a gift," but rather an offering – the root has the sense of something that we lay out before God, unsure if, in its simplicity, it is something that will be accepted. But can we take a few minutes in the hubbub of our day? If evening challenges us to let God and encounter God in precisely those moments we are not in control, and if, as I discussed on 2nd day Rosh Hashanah, each morning interrogates us and reminds us before the day begins that we write the book of our lives with our actions, we declare who we are and what is most important to us by what we do each day, I think the afternoon asks us, "Can we step out of the noise in the midst of our day?" Can we find God in the afternoons of our lives?"

The Blessings of the Road

What might an afternoon prayer offer us? The first thing is what I'll call "The Blessings of the Road." Let me explain with another Mincha story. It comes from a trip to Washington DC that I took with Benjamin and his 5th grade graduating class at the Lerner School this past spring. (Can I take one moment with so many people in the room to say what a blessing it is to have the Lerner school in our community, what a treasure it is for us to have a place where our children can be steeped deeply in the Jewish community and the Jewish tradition and the Hebrew language during such formative years?) So there we are on the Mall; we've spent a glorious afternoon visiting the Lincoln Memorial, the Jefferson Memorial, the monuments for

Martin Luther King and World War II and the Korean War. The sun is going down. We've just finished a much needed picnic dinner and, while some of the kids start to play catch, a few of us gather under some trees to daven mincha. And, as I prayed to God and watched the sun paint the white marble of the monuments in gold and bathe the trees in a rich, gentle green, I was filled with gratitude for America, for the freedoms I could enjoy to pray as Jew, in public, unmolested, in this seat of power and influence throughout the world. It's not that I couldn't have thought those thoughts without praying, but it felt different to place those thoughts in the context of Jewish history – in a while, as part of the Yom Kippur Musaf service we will include the martyrology, a service that lists place after place and time after time where Jews were persecuted and suffered just for being Jews – it felt different to stand on the Mall with a kippah, praying and to thank God for the precious freedom we enjoy as Jews in the United States in this moment. And I became mindful of the gifts that praying on the road can offer. When we are willing to stand – as a Jew – amidst society, under the protection of God, and be seen doing something very intimate in a public space, or to create private spaces in public place, it effects not only us, but our prayers.

You've heard me tell the story of a boy who goes wandering in the woods one morning. He finally returns home and his worried parents ask him, "Where were you?"

"I went to the woods to pray," says the boy.

"You know God is the same everywhere," says the father to his son.

"I know," says the boy, "but I'm not."

We are not the same everywhere. What blessings might we be offered by saying mincha at the hospital? Or at the university? Or at the office? Or by the side of the road?

Compromise

The second possibility mincha can offer us is compromise. Just a little over a year ago, I performed a wedding for a young couple in our community who, as part of their extended family, have a number of people who are Orthodox. The ceremony was in the early afternoon and the reception would go on late into the evening and so, at the reception, a group of Orthodox men gathered in a corner of the hall, took out their iPhones and, without a mechitza, davened mincha as men and women mingled nearby. Right here in our own community, this prayer offered on the road was a constant reminder of the way in which rules must meet life and how that is a good thing, a moment to savor for its richness not mourn because our religious life did not live up to an ideal spelled out in a book. Did you know that there are two opinions one can find in Talmudic commentaries about how the mezuzah should be placed on our doorposts? Commenting on Menachot 33a, Rashi says the mezuzah should be vertical; Rashi's grandson, Rabbeinu Tam, says it should be horizontal. But how do we place it? Diagonal. Why? Compromise. We see it on the way into our houses – a good reminder of how important it is in our familial relationships to compromise – and we see it on the way out – a good reminder that, on the road, we must be open to compromise because by doing so allows us to learn what life and the road can teach us.

Always Saying Good Bye / Saying Good Bye Ceremoniously

One thought not just about where we say mincha, but when. The word צהורים / tzohoraim means two "tzohars" – two lights or, more familiar, "twilight." In the Talmud

(Berachot 29b) Abaye bar Avin and Rabbi Hanina bar Avin, these two sons of Avin said that “fixed prayer [which according to Rabbi Eliezer is no prayer at all] is any prayer not offered with חמה חמה, the reddening or quieting of the sun.” In other words, to really pray, we must pray in that glorious moment right at dusk as the sun turns red and the world grows quiet. Others disagree – they say waiting that long risks missing the time to offer the prayer altogether. But the Avin brothers insist that we wait until the very last moment of the day. In this debate about when to say mincha is an important idea: how long should we wait to say what is most important to us? It’s true. There is something special about waiting until the end. There are words that come to us in the glorious beauty of twilight, in the reddening of the sun, in the quiet at the end of the day. Their view is recorded – it has a place, but it is not accepted as the halachah. Waiting too long to say what matters most is a mistake.

The book *Life of Pi* tells the fantastical story of a boy who floats across the Pacific ocean with a Bengalese tiger named Richard Parker until they are finally marooned on a beach on the edge of a Mexican Jungle. The author describes the moment he is lying facing down in the sand:

"And then Richard Parker, my fierce companion, the terrible one who kept me alive, disappeared from my life....I wept like a child...I was weeping because Richard Parker left me so unceremoniously. What a terrible thing to botch a farewell...It’s important in life to conclude things properly. Only then can you let go. Otherwise you are left with words you should have said but never did, and your heart is heavy with remorse...I suppose in the end the whole of life is an act of letting go but what always hurts the most is not taking a moment to say good bye. I was never able to thank my father for all I'd learned from him. To tell him without his lessons, I would never have survived. I know Richard Parker is a tiger but I wish I had said, "Richard Parker, it's over. We have survived. Can you believe it? I owe you more gratitude than I can express. I couldn't have done it without you...Thank you for saving my life. I love you Richard Parker. You'll always be with me."¹

Forty years ago today on the Hebrew calendar, on Yom Kippur and during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Egypt and Syria launched a coordinated surprise attack on Israel. On the Golan Heights, 180 Israeli tanks faced 1,400 Syrian tanks. Along the Suez Canal, fewer than 500 Israeli troops with 3 tanks were attacked by 600,000 Egyptian soldiers backed by 2,000 tanks and 550 aircraft.² There is no contest of suffering, but comparisons can offer some perspective on the depth of the loss. 2,656 Israelis were killed in the Yom Kippur War; 340 fewer than in the 9/11 attacks 12 years ago. But the number of Israelis killed was out of a country that, then, had approximately three and a half million people, 1/100 the size of the United States in 2001. People rushed to the front. A few nights ago, some of us watched a movie that described how people fled the synagogue in the middle of their prayers that day; they drove away to the front and never came back. I wonder what words did they leave unsaid, not knowing they would never see their loved ones again?

¹ This is adapted from page 316-17 of the book and the movie screenplay

² http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/History/73_War.html

Rabbi Eliezer says, “Repent one day before you die” (Pirkei Avot 2:15). Later, the Talmud asks, “Does a person then know when he will die? Therefore you should repent today; perhaps tomorrow you will die.” You will then find that all your days are spent with *tshuva*.” (Shabbat 153a). Repent today. Apologize today. Say, “I love you” today. Should we wait for the reddening of the sun to pray? Or should we pray in the midst of the day, when life is swirling all around us? Our lives keep flowing by, day after day, week after week, and we don’t stop to pay attention, to God, and to those we love the most. They are crying out – our children, our spouses, our parents and friends are crying out. They yearn today to hear the words we plan to say at the end. Perhaps the skill of mincha is to learn to speak in the middle of the afternoon and not to wait for “the right moment,” not to wait for twilight and the reddening of the sun, not to wait for just the right time to say the words our loved ones yearn to hear, because if we wait, we don’t ever know when the day is going to end. The world is full of hearts broken from words never spoken, words we assumed we would have time to speak, or words we assumed the other person knew so we never gave them voice, words we were waiting to say until just the right time, but the end came too soon. Perhaps mincha is the prayer we offer because we do not know when the day will end, when the call will come that may take our loved ones from us forever.

Meditation

We are going to conclude as we have the past few years, with an exercise leading into the yizkor service. If it is your custom to leave for *Yizkor*, please take a moment to do so quickly and quietly now. In a few minutes, Eric will come forward and we will begin the official Yizkor service in the machzor on page 290 but before we do, I want to invite you as before to participate with me in an exercise of memory that can help us to achieve the purposes of the *Yizkor* service, to feel vulnerable, to feel connected, to remember and perhaps to give us a chance to say some words that were left unsaid to those we loved so much. You don’t have to do this – if you don’t want to, you may sit comfortably for a few minutes, but please do not disturb anyone around you. For those of you who feel comfortable, I invite you to sit back in your chair; put your hands on your lap; close your eyes; breathe deeply in through your nose and out through your mouth.

Imagine yourself in a room; it is a comfortable room, safe, warm, you feel good and are sitting in a chair. Across from you are other chairs in the room, which is empty. [PAUSE] Across the room is a door and as you look over, it opens. Through the door comes someone you love whom you are remembering today.

The person comes in, walks across the room, you greet each other [pause] and the person sits down in the across from you. You are so happy to see each other. You look into your loved one’s eyes. See the familiar color there. The warm smile on the face, the color of the hair, and its texture. You reach out and take the hand in yours. It is a familiar touch. As you sit together, take a few moments to sit in silence and enjoy being together. Tell your loved one the deepest yearnings of your heart. Words of gratitude. Words of apology. Words of love. Ask them for their advice. Open yourself up to the wisdom they possess.

Other chairs are there. Others you are here to remember come in the door – slowly you greet each one, and search their eyes, their skin, their hair, their smile. Sit with each one and try to see them anew, and to forgive them in your heart if you can. [pause] Take some time to

say to each one what you have come to say. [pause]. Spent some quiet time and feel the joy of being together.

Take a moment to say good bye. You rise and hug each one of your loved ones in the room and they walk over to the door, look at you again, and leave. When you are ready, please open your eyes. We rise and turn to page 290.