

## ***A Prayer at Evening Time***

First Day Rosh Hashanah, 5773

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Rabbi Lionel Blue, on BBC Radio 4's *Thought for the Day*, once told a story about a man who fell over the edge of a cliff; but managed to grab hold of a bush that grew halfway down. Hanging on grimly, looking at the abyss below and feeling his grip starting to slip, he decided that prayer was the only way out for him; so he called: *'Is there anyone up there to help me?'*

A deep, basso profundo, voice answered immediately, and said: *'My child: trust Me. Let go of the bush, and I will hold you up, and save you.'* The man, desperately holding on, looked up for a moment, looked down for a moment. He was very quiet for a while and then called out again: *'Is there anyone else up there?'*

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We have a hard time letting go. I want to talk today about the word Erev, from the phrase on your cards, Erev va'voker עֶרֶב וְבֹקֶר וְצַהֲרַיִם – evening, morning and afternoon. I begin with that joke because so much of evening time is about letting go, and we don't like to let go. Evening is not the same as night time, although the liturgist has only one word for that span of time between sunset and sunrise – evening can feel peaceful. It is a time when we wind down from the day, when a family can eat together, when the sun sets and beautiful color fills the sky, when we relax. But all that beauty takes place because night is coming, because darkness fills the world and sooner or later, at some point in the evening, we all need to let go. We all need to sleep.

As human beings we are less and less acquainted with the experience of evening and night – not only because electric lights light up our skies and few of us ever experience true darkness in nature – the kind of night sky that underscored God's promise to Abraham thousands of years ago that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars of heaven – but because we are staying up later and getting up earlier. We are literally getting less sleep.

According to the Chair of Circadian Neuroscience at the University of Oxford, Professor Russell Foster, the average person in the 1950s slept eight hours. Today that average is 6.5 hours. According to Foster, for teenagers – who may be sleeping in this sermon because they're overtired – the story is even worse – they need nine hours of sleep but, on average, they get only five. 31% of American drivers will, at some point in their lives, have incidents of what researchers call "microsleep" – or what we'd call "falling asleep at the wheel" – and in America, it is estimated that there have been 100,000 auto accidents due to "microsleep." We are not sleeping enough.

You did not come to shul on Rosh Hashanah to hear the rabbi tell you to sleep more – insert joke about rabbi's sermons here ☺ My point is not that we should sleep more, but rather that our fight against sleep, our attitude – that we think it's lazy – Former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, once famously quipped: "Sleep is for wimps" – our prejudice against sleep represents not just why we are tired during the day, but the loss of a something deeper, more precious: the mysteries and beauties of night time.

Important things happen while we're sleeping. "After you've tried to learn a task," Foster says, "and you sleep-deprive individuals, the ability to learn that task is smashed...Our

ability to come up with novel solutions to complex problems is hugely enhanced by a night of sleep.” But even those insights betray a bias – that the value of sleeping is measured by what it allows us to do when we’re awake. But evening and nighttime are not just tools for a more productive day; they are doorways into a different way of being in the world that resists measurement and evaluation, that cannot be seen, that is beyond our control, that requires us to let go, rather than call out – Is there anyone else up there? I wonder if the doorway to the tefillat aravit – the prayer of erev, evening – can only be unlocked by letting go. What is aravit?

The Midrash says that Jacob tiken aravit – that it was Jacob “fixed the evening prayer.” Jacob stole his brother, Esau’s, birthright. Esau flies into a murderous rage, Jacob finds himself sent away by his parents to live elsewhere, he is alone in the desert when we are told “ויפגע במקום” – the word “vayifga” has a violent connotation – “he hit upon the place,” “place” being one of the many words for God, so Jacob collided with God. It was not something he controlled; it was not an encounter he chose.

The midrash says Jacob spent had spent the previous 14 years awake, studying in the yeshivot of Shem v’Ever, mastering what the Hasidic commentator Ma’or VaShemesh calls “Sod Torah” – the secret of Torah. Jacob had prepared himself for any and every contingency – he had learned Torah for all situations and all times; this approach to things is embodied in the book *Halachic Man* by the Orthodox theologian, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik in which he writes about how the archetypal halakhic Jew experiences the sunset: “*When halachic man looks to the western horizon and sees the fading rays of the setting sun or to the eastern horizon and sees the first light of dawn and the glowing rays of the rising sun, he knows that this sunset or sunrise imposes on him anew obligations and commandments.*”

The Torah tells us the meaning of the sunset – it means the time for mitzvot like prayer and tefillin and tzitzit is ending and the time for other obligations is beginning – that is Sod Torah; a way of looking at, understanding and ultimately controlling the world. Jacob had mastered that, but, says the Ma’or VaShemesh, there is another way of relating to the world that Jacob couldn’t learn in Yeshiva, he couldn’t prepare himself for, for it is precisely how we respond to surprise: Sod Tefillah – the secret of prayer, and it was this secret that Jacob learned that night in the desert. The midrash says that that night, “God extinguished the sun. That Jacob tried to move on but the world became like a wall before him.” Jacob wants to move on, but God had other plans. God makes him sleep.

We think about prayer as something that comes from us or from the siddur – as words we say to God. “Modim Anachu Lach” / “We thank You God” or “Is there anyone else out there?” And when I learned this midrash about Jacob and the evening prayer, I always assumed that the prayer was what Jacob said in the morning: “Behold, God was in this place and I, I did not know it.” But Jacob said those things in the morning, not the evening! What then was his evening prayer?” I came to wonder if the content of his prayer that night might have been his dream. And I started to wonder what it might mean for a prayer to be a dream.

The word dream has two, very distinct meanings. One is of a “hope, a vision, an ideal.” Just a few days ago, we commemorated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the March on Washington and the speech by Reverend Martin Luther King who so famously said, “I have a dream.” It was a dream in the sense of a hope, an ideal of who we can be. I think it’s a fascinating twist of history to learn that King himself did not even plan to say those words that day. In a recent article about the speech, it is reported that, “As King spoke, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, who was

sitting nearby, urged him to talk about a vision he had referenced in earlier speeches. "Tell them about the dream, Martin," she was reported to have said, according to NPR and other news organizations. King began speaking impromptu, his voice growing more thunderous.

But the 2<sup>nd</sup> meaning of dream is what happens to us at night, and those dreams are rarely ideal. They are often strange, puzzling, hard to understand. They are defined by the fact (paradox?) that while they come from us, we cannot control them.

It is hard for me to believe that it is already my 4<sup>th</sup> High Holidays here at Beth El – one just as I arrived to Israel, one just after arriving here with our family, and now two full years have passed. During this time, I've been humbled to get to know many of you better, to become more a part of your lives as you've become more a part of mine. With the passing of time, I've also seen people's dreams and hopes for life come out very differently than we would have chosen for ourselves.

I have seen people dream for their children, but struggle with the most painful aspect of parenting: however much we love our children, they are beyond our control to help them. We dream siblings will love and protect each other but watch as they grow distant or even so angry that, like Joseph and his brothers, are unable to speak. We dream they will take care of themselves but they stumble; they cannot seem to stay out of trouble and achieve independence. We dream we can keep them safe – but we cannot. In the memoir he wrote after his son died, *Stations of the Heart*, author Richard Lischer writes:

The parent's greatest failures...are the systemic omissions that occur over a lifetime and can be summarized with the phrase "failure to protect." We put you under the grace of God and convinced ourselves that your life was charmed, blessed, and secure. "Son, when you talked about monsters, your mother and I should have told you some of them are real. We lied. Evenings when you go to sleep, fourteen angels their watch do *not* keep. You are not protected. Sometimes your guardian angels turn out to be crows and vultures.

Our families, our marriages, our careers, we dream about our lives but they turn out differently. And soon, we live neither the lives we dreamed about, nor the ones we have. In his book, "Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life," British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips asks, "What makes us think we could have been a contender? Yet, in the dark of night, we do think this, and grieve that it wasn't possible. And what was not possible all too easily becomes the story of our lives. Our lived lives might become a protracted mourning for, or an endless trauma about, the lives we were unable to live."

I can imagine Jacob being forced to sleep, tossing and turning as his eyes close, frustrated that he is unable to continuing his learning or, more likely, wondering how it is that he, having gotten the birthright and his father's blessing, is the one alone out in the wilderness while his older brother, the hunter is sitting comfortably at home with mom and dad. Jacob feels confused, angry. Life is not fair. "Is there anybody out there?" he calls, as he finally falls asleep after 14 long years. Jacob's dreams are not a utopia; they are the madness of the night forced upon him. His evening prayer is not words of amazement spoken in the morning; his prayer is the dream that comes to him the moment he lets go of his waking life and allows himself to experience God's presence as a ladder standing over that reaches up to heaven.

I think we feel our distinctiveness at Rosh Hashanah. We do not commemorate the New Year like other people do. We don't get drunk and dance in Time Square. We don't blow that thing that you blow at kids' birthday parties. We blow a shofar, a ram's horn that symbolizes not only the coronation of God as King, but a wail against what we don't understand. We pray and reflect. The bible begins – darkness was on the face of the deep. First there was evening, then there was morning. It is from darkness that we begin the long journey from Rosh HaShanah to Yom Kippur.

The root Erev has another meaning - l'arev – to mix up, to blur boundaries, to confuse – and it is that mixing up boundaries that turns one private space into one large private space on Shabbat thru the eruv. The tradition says, Ma'ariv ein la keva – it has no fixedness. It corresponds to no offering on the altar – just limbs and fats leftover from the morning and afternoon.

The world needs a bit more confusion. It is filled with people who claim to know God, to have the truth. As I write this sermon, some people scream – “How can we even think of using force in Syria? There is no alternative to Assad. We'll just be emboldening Al Qaeda who is ready to take over, and wasting money that we need to spend here at home!” Others insist: “How can we not use force after chemical weapons have been used? When not going to war will undermine America's credibility after this red line has been crossed?” Few people are willing to speak the truth: that knowing what is the moral and smart thing to do is not clear. It's a mess, and nobody has a monopoly on what to do.

The world needs not just more tolerance, but more pluralism. Tolerance means, “I will tolerate you.” I know I'm right, and I know you're wrong, but I'm not going to kill you or yell at you, I'm going to allow you to be with me in my rightness. People who practice tolerance are not confused; they have the truth, they're just more polite than others. Pluralism is more complicated. Pluralism means, “I believe in myself, in my understandings of God, of Judaism. I believe I know what is best for our country, and for our State.” But it also means, “These things are pretty complicated, and I don't think my way of thinking is the only possible truth.” It means you carry around a note in your pocket that says, “I'm actually a little confused because that is part of what it means to be a human being – to not have access to the whole truth.”

Erev has one more meaning – something that is Arev is sweet. We say in Yedid Nefesh – “ye'erv lo yedidutach” – Your companionship, God, will be sweet to my soul.” And so, within Erev is darkness, and confusion and sweetness, and I wonder if that isn't our task this High Holidays: to transform darkness and confusion to sweetness. If perhaps that is our challenge: to learn to sing God's praises even in evening time.

As part of today, I thought I would try to give you an evening prayer – some words or a thought to say before going to sleep at night, a tool for bringing this idea back into your lives. In addition to the evening service, Jewish tradition tells us that the last thing we should say before we drift off to sleep at night is the Sh'ma which is technically not a prayer, but a kabbalat ol malchut shamayim, an acceptance of the kingdom of Heaven, a surrender, a letting go. That may tell us that the evening prayer is less a formulation of what we want to say, less an assertion of own self and more the creation of a space for an encounter with God. It is an encounter that comes to us rather than something we create. We can prepare by quieting ourselves, by trying not to fight or stay awake too long, but rather by embracing the mystery of whatever will come. As circadian neuroscientists have found, something important and

creative happens to us when we embrace the nighttime – just as we need nighttime to reconcile what we’ve learned in the day – a task, information, something important happens to our spirit as well; we reconcile the dreams we had and the life we lived into our life as it [is?]. We take the darkness and the confusion and can transform it to sweetness and blessing.

Abraham Joshua Heschel had a very different reaction to sunset than Rav Soloveitchik. He once began an evening lecture by saying, “Friends: A miracle just happened!” The room grew quiet in anticipation. “The sun set,” he told them. Our dreams will not all be fulfilled. Our children, our families, our careers – our lives – all of them have darkness and confusion. But there are miracles happening all around us if we can stop fighting, stop holding on, stop waiting for another type of help to come along, stop mourning the lives we have not lived, and be still. Can we allow ourselves to fall asleep not in fear and frustration, but rather with awareness of the miracle of life all around us? Can we sing God’s praise at night? Can we find gratitude in the evening time? That is my prayer for us this Rosh Hashanah. Kein Yehi Ratzon – may it be God’s will, and let us say, Amen.