

A Prayer for the Morning

2nd Day Rosh Hashanah, 5774

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How should we wake up in the morning? When we hear that question, I can imagine some of you are thinking – rabbi, that’s my bedroom! It’s private. Frankly, it’s none of your business. And at one level, you’re right, it is none of MY business, but at another level, it is not quite right because the Jewish tradition does not just live at synagogue on Shabbat and holidays. Perhaps one of the great insights of the Jewish tradition is that the God who created and rules the universe and the God who loves and cares and remembers each of us at every moment is One. A vision of Jewish life that confines God to particular places and times is thin; such an understanding of God is impotent and irrelevant. A number of years ago, Rabbi Michael Gold wrote a book on Jewish Sexual Ethics called, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?* The short answer to his question was an emphatic, Yes. So, this morning I want to continue our journey from evening to morning time and talk about the Jewish way to wake up in the morning, בבקר.

Joy

The first way to wake up in the morning is with joy. How many people hear their alarm clock and say, “Hurray! It’s time to get up!” But Judaism has long associated morning time with joy. The psalmist tells us – b’arev yalin bechi v’laboker rina – we may lie down in the evening in tears, but joy comes in the morning. Why do we feel joy in the morning? The morning liturgy tells us, “God illumines the world and those who dwell upon her with compassion and in God’s goodness renews the works of creation each and every day.” We don’t take for granted what a miracle it is that the sun rises; we experience sunrise as compassion not only because the sun brings comfort after the cold of night, but illumination and insight – that what was dark and unknown can now be seen; that things that were once a mystery are now understood. We experience the morning as a sign of God’s ever unfolding compassion. Ask most people about an image of God on the High Holidays and they will tell you God is King, God is Judge, and that’s not wrong, but too often it gets lost that in those images God is not just a King, but God is a benevolent King, a compassionate Judge: “You are slow to anger, easily appeased. You do not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that we change our ways and live...if one returns, You accept that person back immediately.” We forget that the ultimate message of the High Holidays is not only that we have sinned, but that through repentance and prayer and tzedakah, you do not need to be the person tomorrow that you are today; that the world is not merely fated to be the way that it is; we can change. The world can change. That is a message of hope and joy.

As Jews we don’t do joy very well. We don’t think of ourselves as “joyous.” If I asked you to think of the first three adjectives that come to mind when you hear the word, “Jew,” you might say, “hard-working,” or “stubborn” or “enduring” but I’m guessing few people would say, “joyous.” We don’t say, “Jews, we’re so happy!” Jon Stewart pointed this out this year about Passover and Easter. You remember? On their holiday about death and resurrection, their children get chocolate eggs. On our holiday about freedom, we get horse radish in root form! On Purim, we get some fun, but the story is: Haman tried to kill us, but we survived!

And yet, Judaism is not just about death and survival – we are to wake up every morning with joy! I once heard the story of an army spokesman say that when he enlisted, his commanding officer conducted a test. He put a black dot on a white wall and asked everyone what they saw. They answered “a black dot.” No, he said, you see a vast white wall and a tiny black dot. Judaism doesn’t ignore the black dot, but we also insist upon seeing the vastness of light, we wake each morning and acknowledge that God renews each day the works of creation – and that should bring us joy.

Gratitude

Related to joy, the second way that we wake up in the morning is with gratitude. As I mentioned yesterday, we go to sleep with the words of the Sh’ma on our lips. We also wake up with words. In the regular weekday siddur, you can find a prayer that is just a couple of lines traditionally said each morning: מודה אני לפניך מלך חי וקים שהחזרת בי נשמתי בחמלה רבה – אמונתך – we begin with the words, “I am grateful to You.”

I say that gratitude is related to joy because it is very hard to feel a sense of joy without gratitude. Gratitude is not a reflection of our circumstances but rather of our way of seeing the world. An ingrate says, “The only reason Sarah helped me is to make sure I’ll reciprocate when she needs me.” An ingrate views the world through a utilitarian lens and says each person looks after her own interests. An ungrateful person sees the world with suspicion and lack of imagination; he is unable to imagine others care enough about him to be generous; every favor is a commodity to be bought and sold, traded and returned. A grateful person sees the same circumstances but says, “Look at what Sarah did for me; she really cares about me.” It is a way of seeing the world that does not come naturally, but must be cultivated and practiced, and it is the key to being a happy person.

Gratitude is not always easy. There is a Yiddish proverb – “If you cannot be grateful for what you have received, then be thankful for what you have been spared.” So, we can wake up and say, “I am grateful to You God, that you’ve returned my soul to me.” At the very least, we can be grateful we did not die in the night; from there we can build.

Seeing Another

We have a mitzvah to say the Sh’ma and pray in the morning – the Mishnah wants to know, “When is the very first moment you can do that and fulfill the mitzvah?” It used to be that you actually had a blue / techalet thread on your tzitzit that wrapped around all the other ones. According to one tradition, morning starts when you look down at your tzitzit and can tell the difference between the blue thread and the white threads. But another opinion answers the question in a totally different way: it says morning begins when we can see the face of our friend. The first answer tells us morning begins when we look down and think of God. But the second answer says morning begins when we look outward and recognize the face of another. That may be why the root ב – ק – ר also gives us לבקר – to visit or spend time with others.

Rosh Hashanah is not the birthday of the Jewish people; it is the birthday of the world! The Jewish mission is to be an אור לגוים – a light unto the nations. We are here for everyone. One of the great messages Jews have brought to the world is that every person is created in the image of God; that every person is deserving of our gratitude and dignity.

Whether to look down and focus on God, or to look out and focus on the world may not be mutually exclusive choices. The first comprehensive report on Jewish giving in the United States was released a few days ago. It showed: “The more connected American Jews are to *Jewish* social networks and *Jewish* communities, the more likely they are to give, not only to *Jewish* organizations but to *non-Jewish* organizations as well.” What that means is that involvement in Jewish life – in Jewish ritual and social communities – doesn’t make us more parochial; it actually helps us care and give more to the world. So the third way to begin the morning is actually two – by looking down and focusing on God through which we learn to look out and focus on the face of the other.

Priorities

One final thought about בקר /mornings. The word בקר actually gives us another word: ביקורת which means, “criticism,” because when we criticize we make distinctions. Every once in a while, Jennifer will give me a gift and send me away to spend a few days alone in the mountains or at the beach. I will clear my schedule and have a day or two or three in which I wake up in the morning and have nothing to do with my day except exactly what I choose to do. The experience is exhilarating and challenging all at once, because in how I spend those days, I am forced to answer the question: what do I really value? What is more important and what is less? What will I do first and what will I put off until later, or not do at all?

In her poem, *The Summer Day*, Mary Oliver writes:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
Into the grass, how to kneel in the grass,
How to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
Which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?

Morning interrogates me – “what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?” The light of the sun is not only warm and compassionate – its illumination can be harsh because it shows who we really are. We read in the machzor, “You [God] recall all that is forgotten, and you will open the book of memories” but then it switches from the 2nd person to the 3rd person – כל אדם בו – ומאליו יקרא, וחותרם יד כל אדם בו – our new Machzor has a nice translation – “the book speaks for itself, for our own hands have signed the page.”

God remembers. God sees. But we are the authors of our lives. Maimonides says in his *Laws of Repentance*, “Free will is given to every person.” Morning reveals our priorities, not who we hope to be, not who we believe ourselves to be, but who we really are.

I want to finish with a joke and a story/teaching that I heard last year in a sermon by my friend and teacher, Rabbi David Wolpe and that I want to share in his name and, in between, an

observation that, in our fourth High Holidays together, I offer with love and with hope as we move forward together.

The joke: It is Yom Kippur and the rabbi walks outside between musaf and mincha to take a break when he sees his old friend, Irving. He approaches him and, as he does, he cannot believe what he sees: Irving is eating a ham sandwich!

He approaches him and gently asks, "Irving, have you forgotten something?"

"Hi rabbi. No, I haven't forgotten."

Surprised, the rabbi says, "Irving, even if, for health reasons you were allowed to eat on Yom Kippur, did you forget that ham isn't kosher?"

"No, says Irving. I didn't forget."

"Irving," says the rabbi, now quite exasperated, "Did you forget anything at all?!"

Irving thinks for a moment and says, "I think I forgot I'm Jewish."

And I tell that joke because so many of us, so much of the time, effectively, forget that we are Jewish. It is not that we literally forget, but in the way that we live and think, very little sets us aside, makes us different. I mentioned the book, *Does God Belong in the Bedroom?* The very question would have made no sense to our ancestors.

I once tried to interview the Talmudic scholar, Professor David Weiss Halivni (the ilui in Elie Wiesel's book, *Night*) to ask him about when he learned to pray, but he did not really understand the question, because from the very earliest recollections of his childhood, he talked to God. He learned to pray the way we learn to walk and eat and breathe. God was not an abstraction or a philosophical concept; God was a friend, an acquaintance. His Jewish education was not an extracurricular activity for 2 or 3 days a week – which is wonderful and important, but alone, cannot suffice as a child's sole exposure to Jewish tradition that is thousands of years old. His Judaism was not a series of holiday celebrations and lifecycle ceremonies. It was not something he did first rather than second or third. It had no place because it was every place, woven into the very fabric of every moment of his life. Our Judaism expresses itself as awkwardly, as punctuation for particular moments, rather than a way of being in the world.

We say, "v'ahavta – to love God with all of our hearts and all of our souls and all of our might" – but love in the Bible is not a feeling. The passage continues by answering how we should love God – "these words which I [God] command you this day should be upon your heart; teach them to your children and should speak of them when you sit at home and when you walk along the way, when you lie down and when you get up. You should tie them as a sign upon your arm and they should be frontlets between your eyes, and you should write them upon your doorposts and on your gates" – in other words, the way you should love God is by thinking about and talking about and teaching God's teachings everywhere, all the time. Love in the Torah is not a feeling, it is an action. It is loyalty and devotion, and it knows no bounds, but too much of our Judaism is bounded, put into a museum case for display and description; we come to shul to be Jewish so we don't have to be Jewish in the rest of our lives. We remember Judaism so we can forget.

That was the observation. Now the story, again from Rabbi Wolpe. Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagen, also known as the Hafetz Hayim, lived in Lithuania from 1838 to 1933. He was one of

the most influential rabbis in early 20th century East Europe. The story is told about someone who used to be a student in the yeshiva of the Hafetz Hayim. The student grows up and rebels and grows tired of Jewish life. One Shabbat he is smoking a cigarette when he looks down the street and sees the Hafetz Hayim walking his way. He quickly throws down the cigarette and puts it out. The Hafetz Hayim continues to approach. The student is afraid the rabbi is going to yell and scream at him and remind him of his parents and his tradition. The Hafetz Hayim approaches, takes his hand, looks into eyes, and says gently and with love, "Shabbos. Shabbos."

"That voice and those eyes followed me for the rest of my life," said the student. And what I want to say to you is: "Jewish. Jewish."

We have such a precious, beautiful tradition. It is a wondrous way to end the day and to start the day, and on Yom Kippur, we'll talk about the afternoon as well, but the phrase – evening morning and afternoon doesn't mean those 3 times; it was the poet's way of saying that we can know God *all* the time, from evening to morning to afternoon and back again. Our Judaism should know no bounds. It can help us start - and finish - every day with joy and gratitude; it can help us find God and can help us give something precious and important to the world, but it can only do that if we are proud of the tradition we've been given, and if we have the courage to learn and bring Judaism into all moments of our lives. When we do that, we will be ready to meet God in evening, in the morning and the afternoon and in each of those moments, to be blessed by God who, as the prayers remind us "renews each day the works of creation." Shana Tova.