

YOM KIPPUR 5773

“Even When Lifelines are Cut, You Can Still Phone Home”

Sermon by Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner

At one time or another all of us ask God to grant our wishes, big or little, profoundly important or embarrassingly trivial. But have you ever invested your entire self in a prayer for something you desperately wanted, something you desired with ðall your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might? Do you remember a moment when you pleaded with God, offered everything you had, swore never to ask for anything else ever again, or promised to change for the better if only the Almighty would grant this one life-or-death request?

It's easy for me to remember that moment. I've never spoken about it publicly. But I will today. Because it's Yom Kippur, because we're about to recite *Yizkor* in a few minutes, because I've come to feel like this community is part of my family, but most of all because the message is an important one.

It was an uneventful Tuesday morning, the week of Thanksgiving in November, 1999. At the time Susan and I were living in New Jersey where I served as the rabbi of a small congregation. I was home from work because it was my day off. A totally forgettable day -- until a freakish household accident occurred, which took the life of our daughter, Ranit.

I am sure you want to know the details. There is a natural voyeur inside each of us that seeks out the details of tragedy, like the rubber-necking that takes place on a highway in the wake of a traffic accident. After services I am sure there will be those who'dl want to ask, ðHow did it happen, how did your daughter die?ö But I hope you will respect how excruciatingly painful this memory still is for Susan and me. Indeed, before I began to write this sermon I asked my beautiful wife for the permission to speak about our tragedy -- if she had said no, you'd be hearing a different sermon today. The truth is the details are irrelevant, for the story isn't about my daughter, and it is only partly about me. Rather it is about God.

Yet this much you do need to know: We rushed Ranit to the hospital and the ER medical team worked on her for 45 minutes. During that time I prayed as I have never prayed, before or since: Please let her live. I'dl do anything, I'dl give anything. Please let only her brain be damaged -- I will love her just as much and take care of her. Even if she can never function normally ever again, just let her live. Just that much, please, God.ö

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An eternity passed. The attending physician came into the room where we waited; there were tears in his eyes. He said “I’m sorry but . . .” I never heard the rest of the sentence because my world had just exploded. What would you have done after feeling you had been hit by a tractor trailer? What would you have done when you realized that God had not granted your prayer? Would you be mad as hell? Disillusioned? Or would you stop believing in God?

To be perfectly honest, for the first several months after Rani’s death I didn’t have any of these thoughts; in fact I didn’t think about God very much. Emotionally I felt numb and disconnected; my soul experienced a kind of spiritual neuropathy, an inability to feel much of anything at all. To ask whether or not God had heard my prayer would have required a presence of mind I simply didn’t have. We did everything we were supposed to do religiously -- a traditional burial, sitting *shiva*. The rituals were a source of comfort, if only because they provided structure at a time when all else felt chaotic and meaningless. There were so many people who came to offer their support during *shiva*, and the outpouring of love from the community helped keep us standing. Funny, the rabbi is supposed to offer comfort to his congregation in times of tragedy; now all of a sudden, there was a reversal of roles.

As for my day-to-day life as a rabbi . . . for months I functioned on auto-pilot. I said the right things, I got up each morning, did what I was supposed to do, but there was a hollowness, a dull ache that occasionally flared into sharp pain. Susan and I went to a support group, we saw a bereavement counselor. Yet I still didn’t ask God why He hadn’t answer my prayer; nor did I find myself getting angry at God.

I certainly had the right to be angry. Over the years, I’ve counseled countless grief-stricken individuals angry at the untimely deaths of loved ones. I reassure them it’s OK to vent their anger, to confront the Almighty for life’s unfairness. I’ve always assumed the Maker of heaven and earth can withstand a little tongue lashing from a puny human being without feeling insecure or threatened.

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I continued to believe in God, but with the passage of time I came to realize a very important truth about the God I did believe in. We live in a world of risk and chance, to love is to be vulnerable; to be human is to accept that you may be at the wheel, but if the brakes fail in the other guy's car or yours -- there can be a deadly crash. Maybe there are angels watching out for us, or maybe we're supposed to experience a specific tragedy on a specific day. I believe there are these invisible lines of connection and that very little, if anything, is coincidence. But either way, Ranit was already dead when we arrived at the emergency room. I could have only been angry at God if I believed He could have said yes, but chose to say no instead. And I just don't believe that God works that way or can work that way. Microbes and viruses, hurricanes and floods, swimming pool accidents aren't God's moral messengers, nor are they agents of the dark side. Stuff happens. People are saved, and people die -- and I'm not sure that God is responsible, which isn't the same as saying that God doesn't care. I believe God does care.

How many of you in this room have i-phones? You probably think it neat that Siri, the little genie who lives within, is able to respond to your questions and commands. At times she seems almost human, so helpful; she even "knows" your name! If you are like my children, you may enjoy trying to have silly conversations with Siri, asking strange questions that she cannot possibly answer, just to see what kind of nonsensical response she'll come up with. Sometimes people approach prayer like an i-phone, asking a question to which there is an expected response. When they don't get the desired answer, frustration and annoyance sets in.

Imagine if you only communicated with a loved one when you wanted something. Imagine if you only spoke to your spouse when you needed help. Imagine telling your daughter that she need not call grandpa because her next birthday is almost a year away, and what point would there be to say hello without a request at stake. If we wouldn't treat another person that way, why would we act toward God in such a fashion?

The German Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, speaks of two fundamentally different types of relationship in this world: "I-It" and "I-Thou". An "I-Thou" relationship is one in which the relationship is of ultimate significance itself. By contrast an "I-It" experience values a relationship only to the extent it achieves a specific end. I pray because I want something, and

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am uninterested in God beyond the satisfaction of a particular need. There's nothing wrong with I-It experiences; Buber himself admitted the world could not exist without them. But if we only live with the I-It, we will never know fully what it means to be human or alive.

Which is why we can't talk to God as if He or She were Siri. To diminish God to a magic *genie* in a bottle is to diminish our own humanity. God isn't a gum ball machine or a skill crane to be manipulated with prayer for our own benefit; anymore than human beings created in God's image are the sum of their needs. *ōI needō* is the statement of human beings, but also of squirrels. *ōI am,ō* on the other hand, is the place where all spiritual possibility begins.

In Hebrew, the verb *ōto prayō להתפלל* is, oddly enough, in the reflexive case. The reflexive is all about actions we do to ourselves. A few examples of reflexive verbs in Hebrew: *להתגלח* means *ōto shaveō* because when we talk about shaving without reference to another person, the inference is *we're shaving ourselves*; *להתרחץ* means *ōto washō*; this verb is also reflexive because when we speak of washing without specifying anyone else, it's presumed *we're washing ourselves*.

But why would Hebrew treat prayer as a reflexive verb? When we pray, we certainly aren't praying to ourselves! The root of the verb to pray in Hebrew is *פ.ל.ל*. It means awareness, insight, judgment. In other words, to pray is about raising self-awareness, and gaining insight into ourselves by entering into relationship with God. As bats navigate through echolocation by bouncing sounds off the contours of the landscape, we can better understand our own spiritual whereabouts through prayer. According to *midrash*, when God spoke to Moses at the Burning Bush, Moses did not hear some deep baritone, he didn't even hear Morgan Freeman or George Burns . . . *the voice he heard was his own*. God speaks to us in our own voices; unlike bats, the echo we hear isn't an echo at all . . . but to understand that takes the time and effort to build a relationship. After all, we understand a friend of many years far more deeply than an acquaintance of just a few minutes.

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Prayer is born in a moment of wonder and amazement at life itself. That God has created us. That we can be in relationship with God and God cares. Prayer is born in a moment of thanksgiving, the joy at feeling alive and blessed. Prayer is born in a moment of pain when we cry out because we’re hurting. Yet true prayer never ends with me. It rises up and touches God’s endlessness. In connecting with something beyond ourselves, we are transformed and become more than we were . . . even if only for a moment, a second.

Franz Kafka once wrote “A book should be like a pick-axe breaking up the frozen sea within our souls.” Prayer should also be like a pick-axe. It must break up the complacency within ourselves, for to hear God, we must melt our frozen indifference to the miracles of being. In that moment of desperation when I prayed with every ounce of my being for my daughter’s survival, I felt my helplessness, the naked realization that I am not at life’s steering wheel. But in retrospect I know that God’s Presence was with me. Yes, God hides, but it’s always in plain view. And while true prayer isn’t always answered, it is heard. For God can be felt in the hour of brokenness no less than in the moment of happiness. Perhaps even more so.

This is hardly a novel insight. As we read in the *Psalms*, זָבַחַי אֱלֹהִים רוּחַ -- נִשְׁבָּרָה לִב־נִשְׁבָּר וְנִדְכָּה אֱלֹהִים לֹא תִבְזֶה -- A true offering to God is a broken spirit, God will not spurn a shattered and crushed heart. (Psalm 51:19). King David wrote these words after the death of his own child. Or, as the Kotzker Rebbe once said, “There is nothing as whole as the broken heart.” What prayer does is to open us to the world, which means being vulnerable to its pain as well as its possibilities, its misery as well as its joy. Prayer is no analgesic, it is not anesthesia, but rather a way of hearing God’s voice carried back within the echo of our own. As the theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel once put it, “Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy.”

But holy doesn’t always mean pretty. To be in the presence of the holy can sometimes be distinctly uncomfortable. Did you enjoy the service? Did you find it moving? We’ve all heard these questions, we’ve asked and answered them countless times. But the real question is: has prayer ever disturbed you, awakened you? Did it make you want to change yourself or change

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the world in which you live, even if only for a second? Said the 19th century Hasidic master, Abraham of Slonim, “You should act in prayer as if you were a farmer: first you plow, then you seed, afterward you water, and finally things begin to grow. In prayer, first you have to dig deeply to open your heart, then you place the words of prayer in your heart, then you allow your heart to cry. That’s how salvation grows.”

God is touched by our prayers only when we are touched. If our prayers describe our obligation to make this a better world and we feel a pang of conscience that we act upon . . . God has heard us. If our prayers speak of forgiveness for which we are unworthy and we are moved to forgive those who have trespassed against us . . . God has answered us. If we sense the mystery of a world filled with hidden connections and coincidences that are never coincidental and then momentarily glimpse the bigger picture, God has spoken to us. If we are broken by life and express our suffering . . . yet find the strength to go on, to heal, to rediscover meaning in life, to not take our blessings for granted . . . God has responded to us . . . If our own loss deepens the empathy we feel for others who suffer and makes us want to help them heal . . . then God is speaking through us.

Prayer and worship may coincide, but they are not synonymous. There are times when prayer transcends words: it can be a feeling, a song, a smile, an openness to the universe. And there are times when worship is an empty receptacle, a vessel without content; there are even moments when the words of worship can close the gate to prayer. For years after Rani’s death, I would encounter the paragraph in *Yizkor* entitled “In Memory of a Daughter” and read the words “In loving testimony to her life I pledge charity to help perpetuate the ideals important to her.” I would reach that line and pause -- what ideals were important to our infant daughter? The words of the prayer seemed so hollow, a painful reminder that Susan and I are left with a lifelong void of all the things we never experienced with her -- we can only wonder what ideals would have important to her if she had grown to adulthood.

This week I read about a Rosh Hashanah “texting” service in south Florida. Participants were encouraged to text their comments and questions to the rabbi, which were simultaneously displayed on a big screen. Those present were also encouraged to text one another. Everyone

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enjoyed the novelty. They found it relevant. It spoke to them. Far be it from me to knock an experience that brought people to a Jewish program. Still, like the proverbial elderly woman who kept asking “Where’s the beef?”, I found myself wondering where was the prayer in that experience? And if I say experience rather than service, it’s because the organizers deliberately billed it as a High Holiday experience, lest service sound too prosaic. Yet as I watched the Youtube and read the text messages on the screen, I couldn’t help but notice the “It’s” quality to the event. The texting concerned what people liked, needed, didn’t like, didn’t need. A sense of reverence (and by that I don’t mean decorum) was palpably absent; there was no awe, the feeling of being inside your prayer and your prayer being inside you, an experience of *God praying through you*. Instead, the rabbi at this texting service played the role of a human Siri, commenting and answering questions as a surrogate for a silent God who doesn’t respond via texting, but does hear the silent supplication of a heart overflowing with joy or sorrow.

Look, I’m not smug . . . I know the idealized prayer experience that I just described isn’t one most of us have here. But I do believe that the liturgy and the presence of community can help prepare us, teach us, and open us to have that experience whether it is today, tomorrow, or next year . . . whether it is in this room or in a hospital room, in a prosaic moment one ordinary day or in the midst of a profound and life-changing event.

The paradox of prayer is that you must prepare yourself to be unprepared; to open your ears, your eyes, your heart, never knowing what you will receive. A Jewish folktale tells us about a pious man troubled by the pain of life’s injustices, a world in which the good seem to suffer without cause, and the wicked appear to prosper without punishment. He prays that God will allow him to understand why things must be so. In response to his prayer, Elijah visits the righteous man and invites him to accompany the prophet on his rounds throughout the world, but on one condition: He cannot question Elijah’s actions, for if he does so, Elijah will vanish. Through many days and weeks of witnessing the strange actions of the prophet, the man keeps his promise, though tortured by moral anguish. Yet one day he can no longer contain his anger and challenges Elijah who, surprisingly, before he disappears, explains to the man that the suffering of some is a blessing in disguise, while the rewards of others are punishments.

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When I first heard this story as a child I thought it was to teach us to trust in a good God whose ways are beyond human comprehension. Yet in the years since Ranit's death, I have come to believe the story is less about Elijah's message than the man's heartfelt prayer. In the end Elijah doesn't reveal the doorway to Ultimate Truth, but does show him in word and deed that his questions were worthy of God. Question God, Thank God, Accuse God, Dance with God, Yell at God, Mourn with God, Sing with God. Above all, leave room for silence, and in the silence if you listen with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might, you will hear a Still Small Voice inviting you to travel with God and become God's voice in healing the world's blemishes and pain not just with words alone, but with hands, with feet, with money, with tools, with love, with empathy.

In *Yizkor* we ask God to remember the souls of our loved ones. But I will ask God to help me remember how blessed, how sad, and how grateful I am. I will call upon God to help me realize that *ōl amō*, and because *ōl amō* and so long as *ōl amō* -- I can live a better and more meaningful life and deepen my relationship to the Source of all meaning. So go ahead, use your phone -- no not your smartphone, not your messaging app, not your Siri. For inside your heart there is a wireless router and the guarantee of enough minutes on your data plan of life to reach God; because whether we die tomorrow or in a hundred more years, the miracle of the long distance to infinity is that it is always a local call for those with open hearts, and not just open books.

I'm not always sure what to say to You, God. What can I tell You about Yourself that You don't already know? What can I tell You about me that You don't already know? Perhaps You just want to hear from me for no reason, which is often the best reason; to call home just because I'm Your child, because there's infinite value in the conversation -- even if I can't recall later on what we said. And if there's silence on the line, if my words are blocked and I cannot open up, may my yearning to be near You be a prayer itself, the longing an eloquent expression of a love comfortable with honest silence. And in that silence, the blank space that surrounds the words, the whiteness between the letters. May I hear Your quiet stillness, Your reassuring presence, reminding me that You're still on the line and will never hang up . . . and neither will I.