

## D'var Tefillah

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Last July I turned 60. It was the first time I really thought about my age. Leaving Hillcrest, a company I founded, built, and sold, was hard after 17 years. Like Jonathan, I wondered about retirement. I wondered about my future and even my mortality. I began to ask myself more seriously than before what was the point of my life and what legacy would I leave? In doing so, I also began to spend more time thinking about the role Judaism has played in my life and how it has changed drastically since my childhood.

It is the summer of '69, I'm ten, and the world is in a tumultuous time. It is the age of hippies and counterculture. And I didn't fit – I'm neither hip nor cool. I'm a junior nerd. A few months before my tenth birthday my teacher asked the class what we all wanted to be when we grew up. As you'd expect in a Long Island Jewish shtetl ... lots of teachers, lawyers and doctors ... and even a rabbi. But, when it was my turn I said "I want to be an electrical engineer" ... Yup, just like you, everyone laughed. I was shunned. But I wasn't deterred.

To me, even with social challenges, school was fun – I couldn't soak up enough science and math. But, when the bell rang on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, I felt dread. A walk down the street to my synagogue might as well been a death march, the two hours spent in class, a miserable time. Our congregation was a classic post-war Jewish community. Mine, was the largest conservative schul in our town – although, we didn't call it a schul back then. It was called a Temple – Temple Shalom. And, we didn't call school Talmud Torah, either. It was Hebrew School. Taught by black-hatted Hasidim who arrived promptly from Brooklyn on those days, it was nothing short of torture. My brain wasn't wired for rote memorization and speed Hebrew.

Needless to say, the rabbis didn't like me, and I liked them less. I was unruly and routinely thrown out of class. The only way to get in the good graces of those teachers was to read and understand Hebrew and recite the prayers perfectly. I could do neither. So, they disliked me as much as I disrespected them, and when it came to the Amidah, our most important prayer, I was left in the dust. The hip and cool boys in our class would blaze through it. Embarrassingly, I was left standing day after day after they all sat down and stared at me struggling. I felt as if their eyes could pierce the fabric of my soul.

Against that backdrop, how did I get here and why am I giving you a D'var Tefilah.

Mathematically, impossible, I would have confidently told you in '69. You would think that I

would have long ago left the tribe and followed the “science is good, g-d is bad” road to spiritual harmony.

When it came to my Judaism, my father was an atypical role model. Working 7 days a week in the family business there was little time for organized religion. But, with unimpeachable ethics, deep and subtle spirituality, and a Tanach on his nightstand, which he read nightly, his example was a powerful one. At the most appropriate times he could quote from a book that for me was unreachable. He believed in g-d and made sure his children knew it. We kept a kosher home, celebrated Shabbat on the Friday nights he was home, and religiously changed all the dishes before Passover to make sure our home was as kosher as the rest of the temple Machers. Although, our family is small, we had large Seders, which for me represented the pinnacle of the importance of a Jewish home, unlimited quantities of my mom’s flawless cooking.

When it came time to begin my Bar Mitzvah studies things didn’t go well for me. My rabbi solemnly called my parents one day to inform them “Dan isn’t really making it here in Hebrew School. He doesn’t know the prayers, is completely disinterested, disrespects his teachers, and is very uncooperative. I’m afraid that I don’t think he is going to become a Bar Mitzvah.” When they told me what he said, I was mortified and embarrassed and promised to do better. Luckily, my parents wouldn’t accept the Rabbi’s “no”. They encouraged him to let me try, and yes, after a very tough year and a half, I managed to do the bare minimum for them to declare me fit as a Jew. For many, that would have been the end of their Jewish journey but g-d, or fate, had a different plan.

Its 2001, a new synagogue has been born from another tumultuous time. And, coincident with that event, Irene and I wanted to find a school for our daughter, Nina. We looked at all the usual suspects, but Julie Rabinowitz asked us why we hadn’t considered CESJDS. Why? No answer. So, we went to an open house, Nina loved, it, we enrolled her, and our collective Jewish journey began. It has been as miraculous as it has been long. Irene studying Hebrew, becoming a Bat Mitzvah, Nina a maturing member of the Jewish faith, the music director of Cornell’s only Jewish a cappella choir, and a regular at Shabbat services.

But, what about me? What about the Amidah? [or, literally “standing”]

Once Nina entered school, with increasing frequency, Shabbat at Kol Shalom became our Saturday destination. I learned the service, learned a few of the prayers, and with Jonathan’s guidance fulfilled a life-long wish to read from the Torah.

But, what about that pesky Amidah?

After a few years of frustratingly failed attempts, I got an idea – why not read it backwards? Start with the personal prayer, not end with it. I’d begin in English, and eventually mix in some Hebrew. I’d read it over and over, week after week. It began slowly, and the more I read, the

more the prayer would surround me with faith and understanding, not only of Judaism, but my upbringing, as well. And, I would slowly comprehend my father's silent lessons. I learned that prayer doesn't create our morality. But, in it, we do define our intent.

Elohai n'tzor L'shoni merah, oo's'phatai midaber mir'ma,

## אֱלֹהֵי נֹצֵר לְשׁוֹנֵי מִרְעַע וְשִׁפְתֵי מְדַבֵּר מְרָמָה

Keep me from saying evil things and being deceitful – and do not fall into the trap of lashon ha'rah;

vi'limkale'lai naphshi tidom, ve'naphshi ke'afer

## וְלִמְקַלְלֵי נִפְשֵׁי תַדְּמִים, וְנִפְשֵׁי כְּעָפָר

Ignore people who publicly say bad things about me – succumbing to their words legitimizes them

L'khol tihi'yeh

## לְכֹל תְּהִיָּה

Give me the strength to be humble – because flaunting success diminishes others

Slowly, I realized that my father had inculcated in me a personal code – to inoculate myself from the scandals, immorality and lasciviousness we are daily drenched with on TV, Radio, and Social Media and to lead a good and honorable life;

P'takh leebi b'torahtekha u'v'mitzovotecha tirdof naphshi

## פְּתַח לְבָבִי בְּתוֹרַתְךָ, וּבְמִצְוֹתֶיךָ תִּרְדּוּף נִפְשֵׁי.

Show me how to appreciate the teachings of your Torah and obey your commandments. Because observance is difficult. Unless we appreciate its value, g-d knows that acceptance is unlikely. And, we are reminded that appreciation for what is beautiful in our world and in each other gets missed in an increasingly “me first” society.

V'chol ha'khoshveem ah'lai ra'ah m'hei'rah hephar atzatham v'kahlkayl machshavtam

## וְכָל הַחוֹשְׁבִים עָלַי רָעָה. מְהֵרָה הַפֵּר עֲצָתָם וְקַלְקֵל מַחְשְׁבָתָם

Stop those who dare me harm before they can exact their schemes

In a world of growing antisemitism, a more necessary request of g-d than anytime is recent history

Osey l'ma'aan shemecha, osey l'ma'aan y'mi'necha, osey l'ma'aan kidooshatecha, osey l'ma'aan torahtecha

עֲשֵׂה לְמַעַן שְׁמִיךָ, עֲשֵׂה

לְמַעַן יִמְיִנְךָ, עֲשֵׂה לְמַעַן קִדְשִׁיךָ, עֲשֵׂה לְמַעַן תּוֹרַתְךָ.

Act for your name; Act for your triumph; Act for the sake of your holiness; Act for the sake of your Torah

To me, this a paradoxical reminder that g-d is complex and our relationship with her complex; why would we need to remind g-d that she must act because of her greatness? To me this reminds us it is OK to question our religious texts and sometimes wonder about the sources of its wisdom.

L'ma'aan yehchaltzoon y'didechah, Hoshee'a y'mincha, v'ahnayni

לְמַעַן יִחְלְצוּן יְדִידֶיךָ הוֹשִׁיעָה יְמִינְךָ וְעַנְנִי

A plea to have the prayer answered and for the deliverance of the Jewish people; we are part of a community and not here just for ourselves

Yi'hi'yoo l'rahtzon eemray phee v'heg'yon leebi l'fanecha g-d t'zoori vi'go'ah li

יְהִי לְרָצוֹן אֲמַר־יָי וְהִגִּינוּ לְבִי לְפָנֶיךָ יְהוָה צוּרִי וְגֹאֲלִי

Like the Amidah itself, the personal prayer crescendos with a humbler ending asking that our words be taken seriously, a reminder that our prayers must be sincere before g-d and before our community

And, finally, a spiritual duality conveyed within a repeat plea for peace.

It is meant to be personal, a state of body free of emotional and physical discomfort ... for me to live in a world where I am accepted for who I am. And, it meant to be communal ...for us to live in a world free of divisiveness, bitter disputes, and war.

I cannot read fast, but I can think slow. To learn the Amidah, I was forced to slow down. In doing so, I learned to contemplate my life and better understand my place in the world. When we turn down the speed of our lives, we better understand what g-d expects of us. And, we learn that slowing down our speech gives us power over it – we think about the meaning of our words – and how poorly chosen or intoned wrongly, they become injurious. We learn what Solomon meant when he said in Proverbs 18:21, that “the tongue has power over life and death.” In a time when hateful speech seems endemic may this personal prayer remind us that the gift of speech is a blessing. But if used insensitively it will bring pain, suffering, and even bloodshed.

In this most personal of prayers we are reminded that we have choices and those choices can change the world for either good or evil – we decide.

Oseh shalom bimromav, hu ya'a'seh shalom aleinu, v'al kol yisrael v'imru, amen.

**עֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם בְּמִרְוּמָיו, הוּא יַעֲשֵׂה שְׁלוֹם עֲלֵינוּ, וְעַל כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל,  
וְאָמְרוּ אָמֵן**

May these words be acceptable to g-d and to my community. And, let us all say, amen;  
Shabbat Shalom