

Shanah Tovah.

When I was a child, I understood loud and clear, that I had a nice singing voice. It gave me the hutzpah to take singing lessons in my teens.

In college, I was a music major. All went well for the first year or so, but then I began to have vocal problems. I thought, “If I practice more, I can produce the sound I need to. I must not be working hard enough.” But with my bullheadedness, I was hurting myself, ending up with a diagnosis of pre-nodular syndrome on my vocal cords.

It was vocal rest and speech therapy for me. I even had to rebuild my speech patterns and then I relearned how to sing again.

My teacher Nina took me from not being able to produce any sound, to producing a sustainable sound that wasn't not too bad to listen to. It was hard and painful: stripping my voice down to the bare minimum, then building it back up. My voice was so much a part of my being, my personhood and my worth.

Now, I see a parallel between rebuilding my ability to sing in my 20's, to rebuilding my prayer life in my 50's. It may be surprising to you, that I would need this at all.

Shouldn't praying be second nature for a rabbi? Not necessarily. Building a meaningful and sustained prayer life, is a lot like producing a beautiful and sustainable sound.

On this Rosh Hashanah, we have been immersed deeply in communal prayer, or at least we have heard a lot of prayers. We may struggle with prayer, but we believe it's good for someone, somewhere to be praying, even if it's not us! Maybe prayer doesn't resonate with us as individuals, yet we're here for these prayer-filled communal days.

In yesterday's Haftarah, Hannah prays by asking God for a son; it highlights the importance of personal prayer from the heart. In Jewish tradition, Hannah's prayer is

known as a *bakashah*, or a request. For some of us, this may be the most difficult type of prayer at all, (vs. praising God, or giving thanks to God). What if we don't believe in a God who answers prayer? If we don't believe this, why would we pray at all? And how would we pray as Hannah prayed?

As for, me, my prayer life did not start out looking like Hannah's prayer life. It was not individual prayer that drew me to the Judaism, but rather communal prayer. I went to Shabbat services, but the idea or the reality of praying three times a day, as Jewish tradition teaches us, wasn't really on the table. But then, I decided to apply to rabbinical school. They told me, "You need to begin laying tefillin, davening every day and developing your own prayer life."

I did, to a point. Prayer was something, I was supposed to do. I focused on how to do it and do it "right." But with the rigors of everyday life, prayer wasn't easy. Going to school full-time, raising three children under the age of 8 and working as a religious school principal, it was pretty much: "Get this done because there is so much else to do." I told myself: "Other rabbinic students do this. If you just hadn't done X Y or Z this morning, you would have davened instead. How can you be a rabbi if you don't pray three times a day?" For me, going to a daily minyan didn't help; it just made me feel that I didn't measure up to others: I felt judged for that.

But I did become a rabbi and I didn't have more free time. How could daily prayer mesh with the demands of serving a community? I had a rich communal prayer practice, even when I was leading a service. But deep in my kishkes, as an observant Jew, I felt like a fraud in my own inner spiritual prayer life.

Now I see that I suffered from what some call, “imposter syndrome,” a phenomenon that reflects the core belief that you are inadequate. I felt like a fraud because as a rabbi, I expected myself and I felt others expected me, to pray three times a day.

But unlike Hannah, I didn’t have an earthshattering request. I simply wanted to connect with God or at least give myself the chance to do so, within Jewish tradition because Jews had been doing this for millennia.

I felt existentially lonely in my prayer life. For example, it is probably safe to say that I am the only person who lays tefillin in Sausalito. This used to get under my skin a lot. I would think about how few people pray the way I do, or how I was supposed to be praying. It would get me down and get in my way.

On my recent sabbatical, I found it difficult to pray on my own in Jerusalem. Our neighborhood, bordered on nearby Mea She’arim, the quintessential ultra-Orthodox neighborhood. I prayed in the apartment, wondering: Were the walls were transparent? Did men in the streets with Xray vision see me in tallit and tefillin? Would they burst in saying, “You are breaking Jewish law!”

Finding Israeli female role models isn’t easy. Apart from a few wonderful rabbis, where are the women with a sustained egalitarian prayer life?

But surprisingly, what transformed my imposter syndrome, began in Warsaw. We booked an apartment, not realizing that it was within the bounds of what had been the Warsaw ghetto. When I davened in this apartment, I felt a strong connection across time, space, and generations. I thought about the many people who stood and prayed in that space where I now prayed. I put my tallit and tefillin on in Warsaw, Krakow, Prague, Munich, Berlin, or in Italy or Greece, and it no longer mattered if I was alone. Because I wasn’t. Every time I pray these ancient words and wrap myself in these

sacred prayer garments, I connect to every person (yes, mostly men) who did it before me. I used to fight the that gender disparity, but that has melted away and I just feel connection across the generations. My desire to connect with God is rooted in those Jews who came before me. The past is now alive in the present and the memories of my ancestors in Europe are a part of me. In the words of Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, “To know who we are, we must know who we were.” It was an adventure in self-discovery, a way to recover a lost possession. A pilgrimage to Jewish Europe helped me discover who I am. It helped me rediscover prayer as a sustained and meaningful practice. Not only do I honor the memory of those murdered there, but I also elevate the memories of those who thrived there for almost a millennium before the Holocaust. In Poland, literally a Jewish cemetery, I reconnected to my fundamental passion for being Jewish and living a life that is enmeshed with the community now.

But a person doesn't have to go to Europe to learn this. My journey with rebuilding began just about three years before this seminal sabbatical experience. Through the Clergy Leadership Program with the Institute for Jewish Spirituality, I rediscovered compassion for myself, transforming the nagging and critical internal voice, to a forgiving and encouraging voice. (Sounds like teshuva to me.) Strengthening that self-compassion muscle reduces fear of failure and self-doubt, banishing imposter syndrome!

I no longer saw prayer as separate from the other activities in my day. Prayer used to be something you set aside to do, and then you go on with the rest of your day. If you “missed” the fixed time, then once again, you have blown it, (the old perfectionist voice pipes up.)

But Rav Abraham Isaac Kook teaches us that we can only pray the way prayer is supposed to be, when we recognize that in fact the soul is always praying. He says that:

The soul soars and yearns for God without stop, but you stop to pray, then the ongoing prayer of the soul reveals itself actively, outwardly. This is prayer's pleasure and joy, its glory and beauty. It is like a rose, opening its elegant petals towards the dew, or turning toward the rays of the sun as they shine over it with its light. Therefore, as the Talmud says, “Were it only that one would pray the entire day long” (BT Berakhot 21a). (**The Perpetual Prayer of the Soul, Rav Abraham Isaac HaKohen Kook**, commentary on the Siddur, *Olat Ra'ayah* vol.1, p. 11)

So, we each have the rose with us all the time, every day, and when we move our flowing ongoing prayer into stopping to pray, whether as an individual or in community, the rose opens toward the sun. How gorgeous is that?

This is what Maimonides also had in the mind when he teaches that the morning blessings that are in our prayer book, should be said *as we are doing the action described in the prayers* – seeing the light of day, putting on our clothes, straightening up our body, taking our first steps, etc – because then our souls are always praying. . . The rose bud is always with us.

Prayer is transformed from something you “have to do,” to become something life-giving, something you run toward to be in relationship with God. Because praying out of guilt or out of trying to measure up to someone else, is a spiritual dead end.

When I think about the revitalization of my own prayer life, I think of this story from my teacher and friend, Rabbi Brad Artson:

For years, I lived in a house that had a paneled dining room, painted sickly green, presumably in the late '70s during the high-water mark of the aesthetics of *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*. The actual wood grain and tone were covered; the walls looked fake and cheap. I finally asked a painter if he could just coat the paneling a simple white because the green was hideous. The painter stopped, scratched his thumbnail on the paneling. The paint peeled away, he said, "You know, under this green there is actual wood." His team sandblasted and varnished: the dining room was transformed! The wood appears rich and the patterns in the grain are magnificent; He had thought, erroneously, that the wall itself was that sickly green when, in fact, that trashy look was just the coating that someone had painted over the shimmering wood.

The question is: how do we all have the courage to look at that green paint and scratch the surface to see what is underneath? To have the courage to strip down the paint when we don't know what is going to be underneath? What it can become?

I share my journey with you because this is what the New Year is all about: reckoning honestly with ourselves about the areas in our life when we feel like an imposter, having the courage to begin to strip that away and to be ourselves in the fullest sense possible. I did not give this sermon because I expect every person in this room to begin praying three times a day! (However, because I am a rabbi, I would be happy to talk more with anyone here about this and serve as a guide on the side in your own spiritual journey!)

As Rabbi Artson also teaches, the mitzvot are a divine lure that God uses to get our attention. The invitation to pray and to bless is not a litmus test or a pass/fail exam. It is a divine lure – it is God saying to us, "Come dance with me. Come talk to me. Share your hopes, fears and dreams with me. I am here for you." Praying or engaging with the mitzvot is accepting the invitation to dance. The very Hebrew verb for prayer is

reflexive – it means to self-reflect – *l'hitpallel*. God invites us to look at our reflection in the pond of life, to stop, to pause before we re-engage once again.

Hannah was transformed through her prayer for a child. But by risking in her private prayer, she also strengthened her role in the community. At the end of the reading, Hannah brings her own public sacrifice to God in the presence of her community. She sings her own song of thanksgiving. My journey is unlike Hannah's and yet like Hannah's; unlike Hannah's in that I had a strong communal connection and had to build my ability to pray from my heart. Yet, I identify with Hannah because she, like me, ends up with strength in both: praying to God on her own and participating in the life of the community in a public way.

Whether we are rebuilding a voice, or a spiritual life, the journey is the same: to have the courage to strip off the green paint, take a good look and rebuild with faith and compassion. May it be so for all of us in the New Year of 5780.

Shanah Tovah.