

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5781

I long for the pews and cushioned chairs of the synagogue on high holy days. Can we all just take a sigh and a deep breath and remember what past years have felt like. It's not just the cushioned chairs, but I recall the many chagim of my childhood. I spent many hours in synagogue during this time of year. In truth, I spent most of these hours playing thumb wars with my dad, waiting for someone's kippah to fall off in front of me, or counting page numbers until I would race my brothers into the social hall for the infamous oneg which mostly consisted of still frozen brownies and cheese cubes. Prayer, admittedly, in my childhood was merely passing the time. I remember standing during silent prayer and just looking around, being horribly confused about what we were supposed to be doing. In religious school, I had one teacher who told us we should pray for the Philadelphia Eagles to win! That kind of prayer wasn't for me at 11, but maybe praying for the Aggies is more your style.

I'm not the only one who was baffled by prayer. In the Haftarah for Rosh Hashanah, we read the story of Hannah. She is taunted, humiliated and grief stricken. She desperately wishes to be a mother but all odds are against her. In a pure act of emotion, she cries out to God, one of our earliest references of a biblical character actually praying, herself. While in the state of prayer, the priest, Eli sees her and we read that he "watched her mouth. And Hannah, she was speaking only in her heart" (I Samuel 1:12-13). Hannah teaches us that prayer is emotional. Prayer is messy. And not everyone understands prayer, and that is ok.

Similar to the priest Eli, I had a friend who I had gone to Shabbat services with and I noticed she didn't move her mouth at all during the services. I asked her about it afterwards. She explained that she wasn't sure about her own beliefs, but she found it incredibly powerful to watch others who were moved. People swayed their bodies, people closed their eyes, lips moved

without a single word to be heard. She told me that she felt this great sense of awe in simply observing and being the room.

When I first considered rabbinical school, I had gotten it into my head that I better become more religious if this is what I wanted to do. I tried teaching myself morning prayers in college and began doing a few each day. I realized that while I was still learning the meaning of the prayers, the daily ritual brought me peace and a calm way to begin each day. Prayer became part of my schedule; ritual became part of my mindful practice. The founder of Jewbelong coined the term, spiritual envy to describe every time we stand and wonder- should I be doing what they're doing? Should I be feeling something the way they are? Nowhere have I felt a greater sense of spiritual envy than at daily prayers in rabbinical school. Six months into school, I went to talk to one of the faculty rabbis and exclaimed to him "I am living in Jerusalem, at HUC, and I still have no idea what I am supposed to do during the silent prayer! How long do I have to wait to learn that." Of course, he told me to give it time. And I cautiously did. Prayer was ritual to me, but it took some time until it became more than that. As I learned the meaning and history of the prayers, it became spiritual, a deeper connection to me.

But prayer is not just about an individual act of spiritual, emotional, or ritual expression. Prayer can be communal. Sometimes, the most powerful part of a Shabbat service, is simply hearing everyone's voices together. This year, we don't have that. We don't hear our song in unison. We don't get to watch for the slow process of someone's kippah slipping off in front of us as they bow for the barchu. We don't get the cushioned seats, the quiet schmooze while the Torah is marched around the room, or the whispers of what page we are on. There is so much we lose and so much that is lost. Just as the priest watched Hannah praying, we have this unique gift to watch each other's faces, watch our lips move. While Hannah did not make a single sound,

she was praying. We are gifted this year to not see backs of heads, but to see each other's faces, watch our body language, even enter a small portion of each other's homes through the screen.