

Erev Rosh Hashanah 5770
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San Francisco, CA

Shabbat Shalom and Shana Tova.

What a hopeful sight. As I prepared for tonight, I kept imagining your presence filling up this grand room as we would gather to welcome in a new year, five thousand seven hundred and seventy years according to our ancient reckoning. Seeing all of you is **EVEN BETTER** than I imagined.

Let us begin with the very fact that being together at a service like this is a remarkably hope-filled declaration: that a relationship which began thirty two hundred years ago between a people and their God somewhere on a mountain in a desert, that relationship is still unfolding here in San Francisco, California, and in places wherever people have come to pray this Holy Day.

I have been doing a lot of thinking about this relationship that human beings have with God, and I wonder how our conversations with God in fact became prayers. And I wonder if all of our conversations with God are in fact prayers. Was Abraham's connection with God... Do prayers have to follow a formula....Must they be fixed in time? indeed does one have to actually **BELIEVE** in God to have meditations in one's heart?

I **LIKE TO** imagine that prayer probably first emerged from a flow of emotions; the heart felt joy, the heart cried out in fear or confusion, expressions of anger or guilt would burst forth. In that depth of spirit a prayer would emerge.

And I believe there was some sort of comfort, support, validation that came from expressing that prayer, some sense of knowing and feeling known; and then the soulful words became part of the oral tradition and then over time the prayer became part of the *siddur*, the prayer book of our people.

One example: Almost two thousand years ago, a severe drought ravaged the land of Palestine, and the community was in severe distress. Rabbi Akiva stood before the ark,

and in a spontaneous outburst he cried, “*Avinu Malkeinu, sh’ma koleinu* – “Our Father, our King, hear our prayer!” – and then he repeated *Avinu Malkeinu* and added yet another plea and yet another. And to the outpouring of his heart there was such universal response that *Avinu Malkeinu* entered the *siddur*, the prayer book of our people.

We are told that Rabbi Akiva had five lines in his *Avinu Malkeinu*. By the time, centuries later, that the Sephardic Jews had adopted it for their prayer book, they had increased the number to twenty-nine lines; and by the time the Ashkenazim, the German Jews, had finished with it, the number had reached thirty-eight lines, and the Polish-Jewish community worked it up to forty-four lines. [And you think our *siddur* is heavy! After all, we come from all these backgrounds and more with our rainbow of affections. So is it any wonder that our *siddur* would be an opus of 668 pages.]

What the prayer book became was the link between a Jew and her God and a Jew and his community. What this book became was a diary of its people because each generation would make its own entries from its own mountaintop, with its own experience, with the dreams that it dreamed.

And so, more than a hundred and fifty years ago, a group of Jews gathered together because they believed that the Orthodoxy of their day was too shackled to the past. They believed that what was needed was a version of Judaism that would speak to their experience and their dreams and to their world. What they started became known as Reform Judaism, and the prayer book that they created came to be known as the Union Prayer Book, the first edition published in 1894. That prayer book exuded the spirit of that time, a spirit that abounded with optimism, a spirit convinced that the discoveries of science and the insights of human reason and the political enlightenment of nations would join forces and before very long would usher in the golden age of humanity, united in service to the one ethical God and escorted in by the Jewish people.

Those early Reformers believed that by shedding some of the old Jewish traditions, not all but some, that by playing down the difference between one group and another, especially between Jews and Christians, we would come closer to that universal day of human brotherhood that was part of the divine plan.

My father, *zichrono l’vracha*, was on the editorial board of the fourth printing of that old Union Prayer Book and I like many of you grew up on its’ words. Its passages of

eloquent beauty and its' innovations served us well for a time. But then dissatisfaction grew and in the 3rd quarter of the 20th century, Reform Jewry recognized that we needed a new prayer book to reflect the new mountain at which we'd arrived; a mountain that was at once scarred by the holocaust, inspired by a renewed connection to the land of Israel, and liberated by the feminist movement.

It was then, in the late 1970s that a small band of Sha'ar Zahavniks set out to fashion a new vision from our own Castro hilltop. Our founders and those of the next generation took many of the innovations of the Reform Movement and began to craft a prayer book that would add OUR story and give voice to our authenticity as gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgendered, queer and questioning, co-partners in the unending work of creation and revelation.

And the people's voices grew louder.... *Avinu Malkeinu, Imeinu Malkateinu Shema Koleinu*...., Hear our voices.... those that have been missing and silenced all these many years. And the plea gave way into a movement for justice and equality; a movement that would require its own spiritual strategy for sustainability with churches and synagogues erected as safe havens whereto fore we would bring our whole selves together with our religious traditions. And so Congregation Sha'ar Zahav took its place along with the others in creating new rituals and new prayers for expressing ancient yearnings.

Once again the Reform Movement recognized the need for liturgical change – in part to recover some of what had been set-aside in the previous generations, to reclaim the language and metaphor and adapt it for the 21st century. And in that process, my beloved predecessor, Rabbi Yoel Kahn took a leadership role. He and a whole team of authors, poets, editors and eager students, led by our lesbian matriarch compiled the radically innovative Beta Version of our siddur, which influenced our movement's new siddur, *Mishkan Tefilah*.

Which brings us up to now, the glorious culmination of thousands of hours of labor and love, by Leslie Kane, Michael Tyler, and Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, and thousands and thousands of dollars contributed by 13 donors and HINEI ---voila -- *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*. (Hold it up!) Yes, *Sh'ma Koleinu* World Jewry! Hear our Voices!

This prayer book offers us (its users) new entryways to encounter the Divine; to see into a mirror where once there was none; to open a sacred book and find within its' pages such incredible diversity, a colorful mosaic of who we are as a Jewish people.

Siddur Sha'ar Zahav is a vessel for the stories and voices of real lived experiences, of a people too often misunderstood, relegated to the margins, if not crucified at the fence. It is a devotional book of poetry and praise, petition and declaration. It represents our ethic of inclusivity so much so that whether you believe in a God who hears our voices or not, you will be moved by the transformative power of its poetry.

Now after all these years helped by many hands, hearts, and hopes *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav* exists in all its hardbound beauty. We have created a legacy that is unbelievably powerful; A cause for tremendous pride. Daily I receive words of praise and thanks for this spiritual treasury. *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav* is a testament to those who came before us and whose values and ideals speak to us from beyond the grave. *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav* represents both our reality and our dreams. It is our bridge from what is to what ought to be.

For me, personally, when I hold this *siddur* I am filled with exhilaration...for this is my unexpected legacy. I am moved by the wisdom of our tradition that clothes a human impulse (to make a name for oneself) in the sacred garments of mitzvah; and by the power vested in each of us to bestow such blessings on future generations. It is a religious thrill to see you, my congregation as you take this *siddur* into your hands and revel in its beauty.

Come this Sunday, The New York Times Magazine section will feature an article entitled America Prays - an exposé on the socio-religious phenomenon of prayer. The author, Zev Chafets, a self-proclaimed agnostic when it comes to prayer, researched the piece for five months fascinated with the results of a Pew Study indicating that 75% of Americans pray at least once a week. He wanted to know why and to whom prayer calls.

In a brief treatment of Jewish innovations, Chafets references OUR gorgeous piece of liturgy "For Unexpected Intimacy." "Reform Judaism is nothing if not responsive to changing times," writes Chafets. Recently its liturgy incorporated a special prayer for people undergoing sex-change operations. And a predominantly gay

synagogue in San Francisco, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav, has composed its own prayer to be said after anonymous/casual sex.”

Curious that while there are no mentions of sex, casual, anonymous or otherwise, many critics and readers ascribes erotic meaning to a prayer that was chosen for our *siddur* because of its breadth of interpretative potential. Unexpected intimacy happens on the bus, in the bakery, at the bathhouse, in between a musician and her instrument, a child and his parent. As the footnote to our *kavanah* explains, “Intimacy can occur in many forms emotional, intellectual and sexual. It is about sharing the deepest parts of our soul.” To construe intimacy singularly as sexual reduces the reservoir of meaning and undermines our far reaching goals.

But let's not be apologetic.

We included this prayer well aware of its risks. There were those who said don't put it in. But there were others who helped us to see why we needed to include it. Gay men who candidly spoke about their life-preserving encounters having grown up being told that their natural desires were an abomination – finding the courage to venture out and overcome self-loathing- miraculously finding another whose mutual desire was embodied and clothed in dignity, kindness, and generosity – was nothing short of *pikuach nefesh*, the saving of a soul ...the Redeeming of the captive...and giving strength to the weary... a *mechaya*, a *bracha*, a blessing all the way.

Yes, our *siddur* distinguishes itself because it speaks to the real and complicated, sometimes messy lives of human beings. We who barely survived the height of the AIDS crisis, we who cared for each other during those dark years, we know something about intimacy and we will not be shamed. In order to heal centuries of homo and trans phobia, we ought to affirm prayer that celebrates our sexual and affectional relations as authentic and Jewish and morally good.

The MAhaRal, the great rabbi of 16th century Prague, taught that the torah is incomplete without each generation adding to it. We have inherited from over three thousand years of spiritual wisdom and we have added to it by making a *tikun*, a repair. We are completing it by adding in parts of the story that were shunned, silenced and hidden. And ‘the words we use carry with them the places they have been (adapted from M.M. Bakhtin).

Just like the rabbis of the *Talmud*, who took a rather pluralistic approach, we included over 110 voices and expressions of our reality. And so, our *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav* is an ethical will of sorts, as we bequeath to each other and to those who will come after us an instructive account of the ideals and attributes closest to our hearts

There is a beautiful Chasidic saying: If I tell you my story, you will listen for a while, and then you will fall asleep. But, if as I tell you my story, you begin to hear your own story, you will wake up.”

Take for example this piece in our siddur by Ray Bernstein:

Remembering the Bar/Bat Mitzvah problem.

Today I am a man.

Today I am a woman.

Today I am mortified.

Bad enough to be growing into this body, but a public celebration of the fact?

Maybe all *b'nei mitzvah* struggle with identity, rules, clothes, traditions, expectations.

But can anyone see who I am, hidden by the make-up, or by a crew cut and tie?

Years and years later, I can say: Today I am who I am. Surely Adonai understands that.

How amazing is it that from here on in, teenagers, will read this in a Jewish prayer book, in places all over the globe, and know they are not alone. Generations from now ... we don't know who they will be.... They will never have to feel alone...or question how the tradition sees them and loves them.

This is going to become the new Jewish tradition. *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav* is going to shape the Jewish story forever. How's that for a legacy!

I love the story of our prayer book because through all the revisions, and all the new prayers there runs the Jewish formula. The secret of that formula is the way Jews respond to change, the way we Jews respond when our world changes or our lives change and we find that the familiar paths on which we have been walking take us only to dead ends far from our hopes and our dreams.

Our secret formula was that we always found alternatives, that we always expanded options, some created anew, some revived the old – but another road that

would allow us to continue the journey from that mountain somewhere in the desert to a still unredeemed future, still partners with God and partners with each other.

So do WE cross the threshold of this New Year ready to dig out a new road for a New Year. For hardly any of us is the world exactly the same as last year. Children grow up, and their world gets bigger. Children move out and our world gets quieter. Loved ones grow feeble, and the world gets sadder. Illness strikes or we lose our job and the world gets scary. A beloved dies and the world gets empty. A child is born and the world sings.

And should we find ourselves at dead ends, let us listen to the voices of our prayer book for comfort and for inspiration. For prayer is meant to be transformative!

Sounds optimistic? It ABSOLUTELY IS! In prayer, and this is why we are to pray, we remind ourselves and we remind God that We CAN CHANGE – each of us as individuals, as a people and a world. “On Rosh Hashanah the world is conceived. But there is more: on Rosh Hashanah we help conceive the world. If we pray with enough intensity, if we involve ourselves sufficiently with the words and the deeds and lives of our people and our God, our ecstasy can be so powerful that from it a new world can flow” (Rabbi Richard Levy).

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was able to combine a passion for social justice with an awe for the mystical– a blending he called ‘radical amazement’– wrote, “To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision holy visions.” “However, prayer is no substitute for action. It is rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness.”

But what of a darkness more bleak? Kevin Johnson writes to us in our Siddur, “Creator, I have been in such dark places a flashlight was useless. I have felt fear no words could comfort me. I seemed lost and yet through Your compassion and loving-kindness I am here. Now. Blessed are You, the Guardian of all who carries me to a safe place.”

The isolation of fear and doubt is lessened, if we realize that the words we utter from our *siddur* really convey our own experience, attesting that others have had the same fears and doubts. The isolation is also lifted because we sense God’s presence, telling us that we are not alone.

Our stories awaken us to each other and to ourselves. We see the thread of yearning that runs through everyone's story. Yearning may be the root of every story ever told. The thread of our *siddur* wraps around our group of storytellers, and we stand within its circle, even if just for a few seconds, a whole people, yearning together" (Ruchama King Feuerman).

During Rosh Hashanah and these next ten days, we remind ourselves of the constant re-creation that we are capable of; we remind ourselves that redemption is possible. And we listen for more insight, more revelation. Through our prayers we can remind ourselves of Judaism's most fundamental convictions: that We DO matter; And We CAN change. Judaism believes that our temper and our temperament are not our destinies. Our dispositions are not immutable. We can transcend our limitations – as individuals, as a people, as a country, as a world. We can fulfill the dream of *Tikun Olam*, repairing the world, one *tikun*, one fix at a time.

Too often, we believe that we are small and insignificant; that what we say and do has no effect on the world's pain and injustice.

From where do we draw the strength to renew our dream again and again?

From the deepest well of resilience and hopefulness our Jewish tradition provides. It is in our collective attempts to pray, that we give voice to the dream again and again. "Listen Israel. All is One. We are One.There will come a day when God's name shall be one!"

"Words of prayer are like live wires charged with God's spirit – they are hyphens between heaven and earth," writes Heschel. God has instilled something of God's divine self in each of us," and we are to carry that divinity forward.

But what if I'm not sure I believe in God? 'Where is God in this world?' is a fair and ancient question. Instead of forcing ourselves to contrive some God concept, might we try more simply noticing - noticing what is sacred around us. "God is where we encounter all the ways in which our bodies and our minds connect with nature, with humanity, and with other people; to know we are not alone, to know we lie in passionate embrace with the world at every conscious moment; (RL).

Prayer offers us a bridge between our dreams and reality, between how we are and how we want to be, between the past and the present ... and the future. When we

pray we walk the bridge; we pray, writes Claudia Bernard, that our “actions may ripple across the collective earth-pond that is life.” Our prayers “ripple across the lives of our human ancestors and the lives of our single-celled predecessors. They ripple across the lives of our great-grandchildren yet to be born and of our children already here.”

Bernard’s Contemplation for Non-Believers continues, “Each tea bag I compost, each candy-wrapper-top-soda-can I pluck from the beach, each child I teach, each heart I hold with compassion, each act of *tikkun olam* is a prayer. . . . to the great web of life.” Yes, “Words of prayer are commitments,” wrote Heschel.

Our prayer tradition is predicated on the belief that within us are the gifts of emotional intelligence, hope, resilience and optimism; and that these resources need replenishment and nourishment to be of use. Prayer is a form of fuel. Everyone who acts to change the world needs fuel, needs spiritual sustenance.

And since, I don’t want this to be a sermon without consequence, I invite you to PRAY in whatever way is meaningful to you.

And I invite you to pray with us at Congregation Sha’ar Zahav.

I need you, we need you to help us experience services of the heart that are alive, vital and transforming, where we encounter the wisdom of tradition in a way that inspires us to live healthier and more spiritually meaningful lives.

For what is a bridge without one to cross it. We have an amazing siddur... but it is no panacea. We need more than holding a fabulous mosaic of art and devotion in our hands. We need to open it and read from it and let the words unlock the gates protecting our heart.

In celebration of our new *siddur*, we will dedicate much of our programming to themes of prayer over the next few years. I will be leading a study group on the Nature of Personal and Communal Prayer using Heschel’s book on prayer, [A Quest for God](#). We are planning workshops and *shabbatonim*, experiential learning where we can discover our new treasure. We are also in discussions with Stanford University about a symposium honoring our siddur. Stay tuned. I hope you will take at least one of the many opportunities to grow spiritually and explore the legacy that is *Siddur Sha’ar Zahav*.

Please, share this book with friends and family near and far. We have already sent care packages to Israel, as a token of consolation after the tragic Tel Aviv shootings. And we are sending a handful to our sister congregation Beit Warswava in Poland and to Sim Shalom in Budapest. Wherever the book goes, we will be leaving our trace. How amazing!

As I think about the future, I wonder what the mahzor of OUR future will be like? No doubt it will contain a very, very long *Avinu Malkeinu, Imaenu malkeateinu*.

Source of Creativity and Mystery and Presence, *Sh'ma koleinu*: Hear our voices. In this beautiful and broken world grant us the wisdom and strength to live what we pray. Help us to make our lives a daily commentary on our prayer book, that we may live in consonance with our highest hopes and ideals and serve as a blessing on Your behalf. May this be Your will. Ken Y'hi Ratzon. Amen