

Not long ago, I was having a conversation with a Temple member at one of the local Starbucks that serves me as a kind of satellite office. It was a serious conversation, along the lines of what would have to be called spiritual counseling, if that were not such a pretentious name for it. We were talking, after a while, about prayer. And, being like the vast majority of Reform Jews who would ever think to talk about prayer in a coffee shop, we were not comparing notes on the many luminous experiences we had while praying in synagogue. We were not extolling the beauty

and spiritual grandeur of our tradition of prayer. We were not talking about how are children were being uplifted by their Sunday School prayer services. We were not longing for more prayer opportunities in our busy lives. No; we were complaining, commiserating, and questioning.

Of course I was not only complaining. I was also explaining, and justifying, and saying things that I deeply believe to be true about prayer, things that I always say in conversations like this. I talked about the

need for patience, about not expecting magic, about prayer working best when it becomes a habit. All these things are true, to the best of my understanding. But also, as I came to realize as I reflected on this conversation and many others like it, these things are almost entirely beside the point.

If you are a Reform Jew who is serious about your spiritual life and comfortable with the place of prayer in your life, then I envy you. I think you possess a very rare gift, to be comfortable with prayer. Almost all of us

would agree that prayer can be, should be, a beautiful and powerful practice. We have friends for whom that seems to be true -- mostly Christian friends, come to think of it. We have heard stories, read books about people for whom prayer is a beautiful and powerful practice, a reliable source of comfort, inspiration, guidance. It just doesn't happen to be that way for us. For most of us it is frustrating, at best, boring most of the time, and for many, relegated to just once or twice a year, during these High Holiday services that are more like modestly pleasant

social occasions than like earnest spiritual gatherings. If I could administer a truth serum to the assembled host and ask you what you truly think about the ancient prayers that form the script for these services -- well, I won't put words in your mouths, but I am pretty sure I have already summed it up.

Pretty much boring, hard to connect with, and even, in some ways, positively alienating.

How did it get this way? Was there ever a time when Jewish prayer was luminous, uplifting, filled with grandeur? When was that time, and

how do we get back to it? I have some answers to suggest today, answers that are new -- to me, at least, they are new -- and they might surprise you a little bit. In essence, my answer is no -- no, there never was a time when Jewish prayer, by itself, was consistently luminous and uplifting. To be luminous, uplifting, filled with grandeur -- these might be the purposes of art, but they are not and have never been the purposes of Jewish prayer. We have become so disappointed and so desperately bored with prayer not because it has ceased to work, but

because we have forgotten what it was meant to work at.

It takes no great genius to see that we are deeply conditioned by our consumer culture. Every errand and every affiliation has a very specific goal, and we expect outcomes that are more or less guaranteed. We get food at Publix. It may be expensive but it is always there. We get school supplies at Target. We get exercise at Gainesville Health and Fitness -- maybe not health, but certainly exercise. We get TV and Internet from Cox Cable,

electricity from GRU, healthcare from Shands or North Florida, financial services from Wells Fargo or SunTrust. Clothing is a little more difficult here in Gainesville, but if we can get down to the outlet stores or to Nordstrom's at the Florida Mall, same deal -- more expensive than we would like it to be, but reliably available.

And so what about Temple? More expensive than we would like it to be, that's for sure. But what, exactly, is it that we expect to get from Temple in exchange for our money? Why,

religion, of course! We want God, even if we really don't believe in God. We want experience that is consistently and reliably luminous, uplifting, and grand. And we want it now, on demand, because that is how we get everything else: groceries, entertainment, exercise, electricity, healthcare. We expect wisdom from Temple, even though we know that wisdom can only come through long, personal study and experience. We expect the warmth of Jewish tradition at Temple, even if we only budget an hour and a half per week for it. We expect

faith like our Christian neighbors seem to have. We expect, on demand, all kinds of things that are not deliverable on demand. It is amazing, really -- if you want to talk about miracles, let's talk about this one: the survival of the synagogue so deeply into the modern era despite its resolute failure to deliver what its members expect and most ardently desire.

It certainly occurs to me that my words may sound bitter or cynical, but really they are just the opposite. The survival of the synagogue, of this synagogue, is an amazing and

uplifting testament to all that the institution of the synagogue does provide to its members. It is a testament to all the needs of the human heart that are not reducible to mere commodities. What we do get here are things we cannot get quite reliably, or without effort, or merely for a price measured in dollars and cents -- but they are vital things, nevertheless. We get to explore the feeling of having faith in each other as we build an institution together. We get to explore the wisdom of a great people with a very particular four thousand year old

tradition of making sense of life. We get to participate in creating a community that is kinder, more peaceful, less harried and driven than other kinds of community we experience. We get to feel the satisfaction here of shared values, common goals, coordinated action. These are amazing, beautiful, downright miraculous things. And you, you are the ones who are wise enough to see and value and appreciate these things. You deserve not only congratulations, but also all of the blessings of a fulfilling and peaceful life.

But...what...about...prayer? That is where all of this started, with the lousy inaccessibility of prayer, with the failure of prayer ... To do what? To always be luminous and uplifting. To connect us to spiritual truth. To build faith. To be the primary unit of religious experience. To make us feel, on demand, as we have felt at our peak moments of existence. But no. Instead of the gasp of awe, the shock of true beauty, the incredible rush of love first recognized, the amazing comfort of accepting the world as it is ... Instead of this what do we get? Baruch atah Adonai,

eloheynu melech ha-olam. Stale words in a foreign language muttered over and over again in no discernible pattern. If we look to Jewish prayer to be our primary unit of religious experience, we will always be disappointed, because that is not what Jewish prayer was ever supposed to be.

No, not the primary unit of religious experience, not the thing that is the experience, not the flame that engulfs the heart. Awe is inspired by the world, not by the words of a sermon, not even by the words of

Torah. Beauty is recognized in the world, not only or especially here at times posted on a website and published in a newsletter. Love is encountered with another heart, not in the pages of a prayerbook. Prayer is not the primary unit of religious experience, but prayer is something real and important and, for most of us, perhaps even something necessary. Prayer is a reminder.

Here is a little Hasidic story for you, courtesy of my esteemed colleague Rabbi Shaya Isenberg:

In the wealthier sections of the town of Ropshitz, where Reb Naftali was the rabbi, it was common for homeowners to hire night watchmen to guard their property from intruders. One evening, the rebbe went walking and decided to return by way of one of these wealthy neighborhoods. A watchman saw him coming from a distance and called for him to halt.

"I'm sorry, rebbe, I did not recognize you in the dark," the guard said as the rebbe drew close enough to be seen clearly.

The rebbe smiled and asked him, "For whom do you work?"

The watchman told him, and then, in jest, asked the rebbe the same question. "And for whom are you working this evening, Rabbi?"

The rebbe was strangely taken aback by this question. He thought for a moment and stammered out in reply, "Why I guess I am not working for anyone at the moment."

The rebbe paced back and forth in agitation for a few seconds, and then suddenly said to the watchman, "I would like to hire you."

"Me?" the man said. "I am a watchman. I know nothing of rebbes and their business. I protect what matters to my employer. What could I possibly do for you?"

"The very same thing," the rebbe replied.

"What matters to me is my soul, and to protect it I must work for God."

"But what would my job be?" asked the watchman.

"To remind me," said the rebbe.

Prayer, this story tells us, is a reminder, a reminder of awe and beauty and truth and love. Prayer is not, in itself, an experience of God, and for those who expect it to be, it will always be a disappointment. Prayer is a reminder that there are experiences of God out there, in the world, to be had. .

It is something of a miracle, isn't it, that something like the synagogue should exist, an institution that enfolds its members in a tabernacle of peace yet pushes and prods them to go back out into the world to find

God. This new year, may we experience our little congregation as a bit of a miracle. It is a world in itself, a model of a community, a place of wisdom and love and shared values. But it is also a place always reminding us to leave, reminding us, preparing us, sensitizing us so that we are ready always to find God, not in here where we spend but a few hours a year, but out there – in the world, in a place of beauty, with another heart. May God this year bless our coming in and our going out. Amen.