

Yom Kippur - II
“A Year’s Supply”
October 12, 2024

As a slightly embarrassed, yet unrepentant Boomer, I spend a lot of time lost in memory of things that happened long, long ago. When I recount stories of what I remember I realize I have been afflicted with the well-known Boomer malady called “anecdote,” defined as being an old guy who tells the same stories over and over. And over. And over. You’ve been warned. Here we go...

Growing up in the 50’s and 60’s, I adored watching TV game shows. The “Price is Right”, “Video Village,” “Concentration”, “What’s My Line,” “Let’s Make A Deal” and the best of all, the *piece de resistance*, the amazing “Queen for a Day.”

For those who have no idea what I’m talking about, this show was simply the most stereotypical, sexist show you can imagine. Women, white women contestants played games to win prizes such as washing machines and vacuum cleaners to make household drudgery more tolerable (if not equitable). These prizes were received with rapturous glee and often with tears.

For the finale they would give the grand prize winner “a year’s supply” of...something. Now, to my 7 year old mind, I imagined that “a year’s supply” meant they would open a curtain and present the winner with a garage full of something extraordinary.

But when the magic moment finally came they would open the curtain and bring out something like a year’s supply of a luxury shampoo - a box holding 12 bottles, one for each month of the year. It was so anticlimactic. A year’s supply - 12 bottles? Seemed awfully chintzy to me. A year’s supply of anything you can just carry to your car seems kind of meager.

And yet the script for the show called for the woman who won to be ecstatic, and she duly complied. The audience clapped and cheered. The winner’s life was sure to be so much better after winning this grand prize!

Not exactly, right?

But it makes me think of what it would be to have a year's supply of something we all need, like a year's supply of joy. Or maybe, a year's supply of peace at the dinner table or year's supply of health, with no trips to the emergency room for anyone we love. Any of these would be a fantastic prize, don't you think?

Wonderful, but unrealistic. Life happens and yesterday's promised calm is thrown into chaos by a phone call with a diagnosis, an angry child, the loss of a job, a friendship that dissolves for seemingly no reason.

Actually, today we are praying for a year's worth of something - a year's worth of repentance. Forgiveness for last year's sins, hope for doing better this year, all year long. And yet even as we fast, if we are permitted to, even as we listen to music that touches our hearts, even as we seek forgiveness with broken spirits, we know deep inside that this isn't really possible. We're not going to succeed living this year being so good we won't have to repent next year. I know for myself that I screw up pretty soon after the end of Yom Kippur, sometimes the very next day!

Our more observant friends, Orthodox and Conservative Jews, have actually taken this into account in their daily prayerbook. Traditional Jews pray three times a day. Embedded in the daily morning and afternoon services after the Amidah, you'll find a set of prayers most Reform Jews have never heard of. They are called "Tachanun," meaning supplications or pleas we make to God for forgiveness. Repentance isn't supposed to be just a once a year thing in our faith.

Tachanun includes what we chanted last night and will this morning:

Avinu Malkeinu, cho-nei-nu v'a-nei-nu ki ein banu ma-asim. A-seh i-manu tze-da-ka va' che-sed v'ho-shi-ei-nu!

Avinu Malkeinu, be gracious and answer us for we have little merit. Treat us generously and with kindness and be our help!

Tachanun goes on to say:

We know not what to do, but our eyes are on You. Remember Your mercy and Your kindness, O God, for they are eternal. May Your kindness

rest on us, as our hope rests on You. Pay no attention to our former sins, may Your compassion hasten to our aid, for we are very low..."

Since Tachanun is not prayed on Shabbat or holidays, it is not surprising so few of us Reform Jews know of it. And frankly, most of us don't believe that we need to pray for forgiveness so often. Most of us actually don't pray every day.

Forgive me, this is not a critique. For most of us, the idea of a God on High waiting for our supplications simply makes no sense to us. The notion of an all-knowing, all-powerful God sitting in constant judgment over us makes us bristle.

But we do believe that we are responsible for our acts, don't we? Our gathering here today can't simply be from force of habit. It can't simply be because we miss seeing friends and fellow congregants so much we all decide to go to day-long religious services, can it? And fasting, too! What fun!

Why are we here today? We all have different answers to that one, don't we? Although none of the following portraits is of any individual here, you might identify with at least one of them. And if I say a name that happens to be yours, please know I'm NOT talking about you!

There is the mother who actually finds meaning and purpose in dressing her kids and just sitting in this room on the Yom Kippur. We'll call her Judith. Half the time Judith doesn't even open the prayerbook. She is simply thankful that this day she can just let her mind wander and her soul be still. She desperately needs this quiet. She read recently the government report on the overwhelming stresses she and other parents face today, including but not limited to:

- Financial strain...
- Time demands
- Children's health & safety
- Parental isolation and loneliness
- Technology and social media
- Cultural pressures and children's futures" (HHS. 2024)

That's why being here right now is so important to Judith. In this sacred moment all of those problems evaporate. Sitting here, her ears fill with

melodies, new and old, Hebrew she doesn't understand. But she doesn't care. The music washes over her. And it frees her, at least for this moment, from constantly worrying about she's not a more perfect parent or person.

When Judith has finally breathed herself into calmness, she reflects on things in her life that have gone wrong: Her temper flaring, her kids inability to get with the program at home or at school, work going sideways. Every other day she judges herself more harshly than God on Yom Kippur!

But here, now, Judith lets it go. She is glad to be here in a quiet moment where she prays for both **resilience** and **resolve**, even if it's not going to be a year's worth of either one.

And then there's Ralph. He is astounded that he raced through his 20's and 30's and is ensconced at 47, with a belly that he always made fun of others for having. He is here with us today but having trouble sitting still. He gets up often, kibbitzes with neighbors, then reminds himself that he really should pay attention to the service.

The problem is that he feels terminally stuck. Stuck in his job, a good job, stuck in his marriage, which is ok but not setting the world on fire, stuck on a path that as a young man he had vowed to reject. He never used to care about brands of clothes, now he shudders at the thought of buying jeans at Costco. He drove a clunker of a car for years, now he wants a new lease every three years.

Stuck and materialistic - not where Ralph thought his life was going. "Stuckness" is making him lose focus. He finds himself yelling at his kids more than praising them. Being stuck has exhausted him to the point where he doesn't know if he can tough out the next 18 years to age 65, the magic age of Medicare. He is here to repent, but also to rethink. Ralph needs a path and a guide to living a life that holds more meaning than the one he's living now. He's praying for **courage** and **fulfillment** for today, if not this coming year.

Susan is 16 years old and sitting here utterly bewildered. What are these prayers? She knows the Shema and the V'ahavta, she remembers them from her Bat Mitzvah. But despite years of Religious School, she has little sense of what today's prayers mean and why she should say them. Like most Reform parents in our day, her parents did not take her to Shabbat services

except on special occasions. Unlike her deep connection with Taylor Swift, whose songs she has memorized, she knows neither the words nor the music to the intimate confessional we are sharing this morning. Neither touch her in the least.

What's worse is her parents took away her phone for the day. Susan can't imagine not knowing what her friends are doing and thinking right now. Bored and confused, she longs for the whole thing to be over, even as she gives her practiced smile to everyone who greets her. She knows that she hasn't been the best daughter or even the best friend this year. Susan finds some words in the prayerbook that make sense. But overall, the Rabbi, the Cantor, the congregation - all of it seems too much and utterly unconnected to the crazy, teenage life she is living. If she prays at all for anything at all today, it is for **acceptance and love** from her friends even more than her family.

Max is here against his better instincts. The last thing he wants to do is sit here and see an Israeli flag on the pulpit. At 26 years old, he did not grow up on the Zionism of heroic battles for Israel's survival. He was barely alive during the 2nd Intifada. He gets the trauma felt by Israelis after October 7th. Max doesn't get why Gaza had to be destroyed in response.

He has no patience for those who argue that Hamas hides behind civilians in schools, mosques and hospitals, that it refuses to give up the hostages, our brothers and sisters, murdering them rather than surrender them. He knows that. But all he sees is the daily flood of photos of Palestinian children, injured, suffering and dying. That same death and violence has now spread to Lebanon. He can't believe that I am not rallying our community to action against the injustice he sees. He is this close to rejecting Israel completely.

Max thinks: Rabbi Gibson is talking about personal repentance, and forgiveness? What does that matter in the midst of the deaths of innocents by Israeli forces?

But no, I am not tackling the war this morning from the pulpit. There are no easy answers. It's too complicated, even though Max thinks that's just an excuse.

Even as Max demands an unconditional ceasefire, I pray for a conversation with him and those like him who are troubled, angry or just confused. I wish he would re-read to Rabbi Fellman's Rosh Hashana morning sermon with its Jewish and moral clarity, while keeping the door open to disagreement and debate on Israel, Zionism and Jewish identity.

Max should realize that 750,000 Israeli demonstrators are angry, too. They are frustrated beyond measure that their own government has prioritized military victory over the lives of innocent, precious Israeli hostages.

Most importantly, Max should also know that his doubts, his anger and his questions do not deprive him of a space within these walls, a place in this community. If he is praying for **open ears** to hear his bitter complaint, that prayer has already been answered. Unless he demands the destruction of Israel in the name of his Judaism like some have did recently, he is welcome to join the discordant mass of voices debating what Israel should do.

And then there's Herb and Ruth. No, they are not married to each other. But they live parallel lives. Herb lives alone in his apartment while his kids and grandkids are far away. Ruth lives in a care facility and got a ride here today from Access. Both are long time members who are astonished how few people they recognize when they walk in the door. Each lives alone. Each harbors regret and resentment over opportunities missed, Each wonders, more than they feel comfortable with, about taking their own lives, about suicide. What is the point of living to an old age, they think? Simply to reach an old age?

They are here because decades of synagogue life make them feel that Temple Sinai is a place where things still make sense. Anne Martindale Williams still plays the Kol Nidre so beautifully it brings them to tears. They love watching leaders, new and old holding the Torahs for Kol Nidre. They take comfort in watching the hustle and bustle around them because it makes them feel that the Judaism they have always loved is not disappearing. Taking part in all of this gives them hope.

And yet, they are serious when the confessional comes in the service. Ruth and Herb ask God for forgiveness, not only for wrongs committed long ago, but for the persistent thoughts each has that will not leave them be, the

plans they devise for their own demise. How will their families ever forgive them if they go through with it, they ask themselves? Max and Ruth ask God today for relief from their loneliness and sadness that drive them to these terrible thoughts. They pray for a year of...what? Even they do not know.

Yet, at the end of the day, at the end of this day, we know that prayers for a year of anything are pointless. A dream, at best. There is no “Queen For A Day” prize of a year’s supply of anything worth praying.

For there is only now. Here. Holding ourselves accountable at this moment for what we have done. Resolving to try to do better, to be better tomorrow. Or maybe just today.

*Today, we pray for **resilience and resolve**, like Judith.*

*Today, we pray for **the will accept our lives or change them**, like Ralph.*

*Today, we pray for **acceptance and love**, beyond TikTok, like Susan.*

*Today, like Max, we pray for the return of the hostages and an end to the war in Gaza and Lebanon. We also **pray to open a dialogue** with Max and those who are angry and frustrated like him.*

*Today, we pray for Herb and Ruth not to give up on life, to get up tomorrow morning and seek the **caring and companionship** they crave or at least let us know of their struggles so we can reach out to them.*

What do you pray for, today, now, this moment? Whatever it is, I pray that you do not keep that prayer locked up in your heart, rather that you share it out loud with someone you care about, who cares about you.

In a kind of mystical way, I believe that saying our prayers aloud gives them life and hope and possibility. In a practical way, I hope that hearing each other’s prayers touches our hearts so that we respond with love and kindness leading to acts of caring, compassion and companionship.

Answering these prayers require a kind of grace from God. Grace, in Hebrew, is *Chen*, the kindness we get from God that we did not earn and don't necessarily deserve. It is the *chen* of Tachanun.

As we prepare to recite and chant *Avinu Malkeinu*, I want to offer a modern version of *Tachanun*. These words are known and loved by thousands in the Jewish spirituality movement. It is a prayer for well-being for all of us right now, not in the year to come. But right now. It goes like this:

May I be safe
May I be healthy
May I be happy
May I be at ease
May I be filled with loving-kindness
May I be peaceful
May you be safe
May you be healthy
May you be happy
May you be at ease
May you be filled with loving-kindness
May you be peaceful

May all beings be safe
May they be healthy
May they be happy
May they be at ease
May they be filled with loving-kindness
May all beings be peaceful
 (from "The Lion's Roar" Buddhist website)

May all of us be safe, healthy, happy, at ease, filled with lovingkindness and at peace. Not this year. Not this month. Not this week. But today. Now. This moment. You are safe - in this moment. You are loved - in this moment. You are a blessing - in this moment. You are safe. You are blessed. You are loved. Loved. Loved. Loved.