

Hamilton and Prayer

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Congregation B'nai B'rith, Santa Barbara CA

I have not yet seen the Broadway musical Hamilton, but I have listened to the soundtrack many times. I am a Hamilton addict and I know I'm not alone. That show has captured the heart of our nation.

Marian and I were given the soundtrack as a present by Elizabeth and David Gaynes and we listened to it straight through on a long drive out to Joshua Tree, to celebrate our 30th anniversary. It was dark out there in the desert by the time we reached the heartbreaking moment in the second half, after Hamilton humiliates his wife Eliza by publicly confessing to an affair, and their life collapses into ruin. Not long afterwards, their twenty-year-old son Philip attempts to defend his father's honor in a duel, in which Philip is shot and killed.

Out of the stunned silence comes a profoundly religious song: "It's Quiet Uptown." Broken, Alexander begs Eliza for forgiveness... which would have been an excellent topic for a sermon on Yom Kippur. But tonight I'm focused on something else. Hamilton sings "I take the children to church on Sunday, the sign of the cross at the door. And I....pray. That never used to happen before."

Lin-Manuel Miranda, the genius behind the play, has accomplished so many miracles with Hamilton. He took a series of events that occurred over two hundred years ago and made them feel as though they happened yesterday. He made an entire generation of Americans fall in love with the founding history of our country. He told the story with black, Latino and Asian actors singing hip-hop and made it completely believable. And in that one line of the song "It's Quiet Uptown," Lin-Manuel Miranda reintroduced an entire generation of secular Americans to the possibility of prayer. "And I... pray. That never used to happen before."

Prayer is my topic tonight. On the night that so many Jews, all around the world, have come to the house of prayer. For many of our people, just like for Miranda's young, scrappy and hungry Alexander Hamilton, prayer has never happened before. We do not even know exactly what prayer is, or how to do it, or whether it is still a meaningful experience in our world. These are my questions tonight, on Yom Kippur, our people's great night of prayer.

I think that for all of us, whether we consider ourselves secular or religious, prayer is still both possible and necessary... and in fact that the need for prayer is urgent today. I know I may not convince you; but Lin-Manuel Miranda gives me hope. That single verse in "It's Quiet Uptown" whispers to us, after he has just split our hearts open, that prayer can happen to anyone... even to one who has never prayed before.

I would like to share with you my own personal experience of prayer.

My own need for prayer arises from the fact that I carry secrets within me, secrets hidden even from myself. In prayer, I uncover my secrets. In courageous and honest prayer, I discover the truth about myself. I don't think I am different from anybody in this room. Prayer can teach us to recognize and to speak our inner truth, with both humility and conviction. Nothing could be more important.

In my job as the rabbi here, I lead a variety of prayer services during the course of an average week. The big weekly gathering on Friday night, and Shabbat morning, and I am a regular member of the early Monday and Thursday minyan. But my favorite weekly service, if I'm honest, is the Wednesday and Thursday afternoon service with our Hebrew School 4th through 6th graders. The Cantor and I lead a short twenty-minute service, in which the kids are all singing at the top of their lungs and then we come to the silent prayer and I tell them to tell God about something they are grateful for, something they are concerned about, and something they are hoping for.

After everyone has sat down, I sometimes ask if any of them would be willing to share what they prayed about. One is grateful for her family. Another is concerned about his grandfather who is sick. Another is hoping to do well on the test they are taking tomorrow. I love their answers, because they are so honest. I tell them that these are all excellent prayers, precisely because they are honest. Only an honest prayer means anything. In honest prayer, we learn about our own secrets. We learn about our hopes, our fears, our worries, our desires and longings.

For our children, those few minutes of prayer may be the only time in the week that they get to listen carefully to their own heart.

When do we listen to and learn the secrets of our own heart?

Some of our secrets are memories of things we said or did and which we now regret. Some of our secrets are things that were said or done to us, which hurt us. Maybe during the past year. Maybe it was fifty years ago. In the inner world of our secrets, time is irrelevant. Our big secrets do not stop existing; they are alive within us until we die.

Our hearts contain a lifetime of secret desires. Secret fears. Secret hopes. Secret wisdoms. All of these secrets are buried deep in our heart. They wait for us to grow quiet and to hear them.

Prayer happens when we reveal a secret to ourselves and become aware of what was hidden in our heart.

Traditional Judaism summons us to engage in this process of self-revelation three times a day: at sunrise, in the mid-afternoon, and in the evening before bed. In our tradition, this self-exploration is a mitzvah... a responsibility.

Our ancestors understood that a person disconnected from the secrets of their own heart is incomplete, and even dangerous to him or herself and to others.

Our ancestors knew that a person who prays for the first time, has begun to repair himself or herself, which is the authentic beginning of tikkun olam, repair of the world.

After Hamilton makes the sign of the cross at the church door, and prays for the first time, he and Eliza walk together in the garden and she takes his hand. The chorus sings: "forgiveness. Can you imagine?"

We need all of this so desperately these days. Forgiveness. Self-awareness.

To become familiar with, and to make peace with, our own secrets.

We need parents, teachers, physicians, and politicians who are complete people, in touch with the secrets of their own hearts. We need to learn again how to pray.

I know that there are many good reasons that we have fallen out of the practice of prayer. Many good reasons not to pray...or at least, not to come here to pray.

- Reason #1 Hebrew. What good to me are words written in a language I do not understand?
 #2 the service has too many words. I prefer silence.
 #3 why should I use words written by somebody else to explore the secrets of my own heart?
 #4 who is God anyway? I don't know him. Why would I speak to him?
 #5 I like the music, but why do they keep changing the melodies?
 #6 That's what I pay my therapist for!
 #7 I'm not Jewish. It's not right for me to try this here.
 #8 I'm just too busy right now. Maybe next year.
 #9 I'm a really simple person; I have no secrets to discover!
 #10 my secrets are secret for good reason! I'll let sleeping dogs lie.

The list goes on and on. And to even partially address just one of these obstacles to prayer would take all evening. But let me say this: none of these reasons not to pray is new. Two thousand years ago, our ancestors were grappling with whether to use words, and which words to use to pray, and what if you don't understand Hebrew, and does one need to mean every word. And can our human words actually be heard by the Creator of the universe. These are important questions, but they are not new. Despite all these questions, Jews throughout the centuries have continued to pray. Until now.

Since I was young, I have always loved a story called the Carpet of Solomon, by Sulamith Ish-Kishor. In the story, King Solomon acquires a magic carpet, woven with the name of God, which will transport a person anywhere in the world. As Solomon flies away on the carpet, undreamt-of knowledge comes into his mind... he spreads out his arms and cries: "What difference is there now between me and God? All wisdom is mine! I am as God Himself!"

In mid-air the carpet stops, lurches and soars, making Solomon fall on his face. When he manages to look up, all around him was darkness. In his terror, Solomon attempts to pray. But he is unable; he cannot remember the name of God. And so begins a long, long journey, in which Solomon is utterly humbled and finally, after much suffering, in a moment not unlike Alexander Hamilton standing broken at the door of the church... he prays.

At this time in our history, I believe that there is a reason to find our way back to prayer, and that is to re-connect to two great human secrets. Two secrets buried deep within us, that tonight on Yom Kippur we might uncover and speak openly.

The first great human secret is that our lives are unspeakably fragile. The supremely stable and safe reality upon which we all rely is in fact easily broken.

In a matter of minutes, an earthquake devastates a great city. In one day, a hurricane renders an island of 3.5 million human souls completely helpless. A perfectly healthy man or woman or child wakes up one day with a headache and a family suddenly plunges into an abyss of fear and tests and chemotherapy and statistical chances and heartbreak.

In our hearts, we hold the secret reality of loss. Prayer can help us come face to face with this truth. Tomorrow morning, we will pray: "A human being amounts to very little. A pile of dust, ending in dust. Struggling for a piece of bread. Like what? A broken pot. Dry grass. A faded blossom. A passing shadow. A wisp of cloud. A breeze. Dust blown. A dream, flying away."

We human beings keep this secret from our children. We keep it from ourselves. Like Solomon flying through the sky, we imagine that we are like God.

The wonders of tech and high speed communications and travel, our modern magic carpets, have disconnected us from the secret of our own fragile humanity. Tonight and tomorrow, in deep prayer, let us uncover the truth that we are human, and will not live forever.

But tonight, on the holiest night of the year, let us uncover a second, even more profound secret, which is that deep within us, in the innermost chamber of our human heart is a divine spark:

Our eternal soul, the lamp of God.
In prayer, we see ourselves by the light of the lamp
On Yom Kippur, our people's ancient night of prayer,
 may we learn once again how to pray.

Gmar chatimah tova.

May you be sealed in the book of life for a sweet, happy, healthy year.