Toldot2016s

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Sermon

1. Shabbat Shalom
2. In the beginning of this week’s parsha, we find Rivka barren and Isaac praying on her behalf for a child. It must have been a pretty effective prayer for in the next verse, Rivka is pregnant with twins! You would think that everyone would be happy but the pregnancy is so difficult, there is so much movement inside her, that she is uncomfortable. The original case of “be careful of what you ask for….”
3. The commentators of almost every generation include long notes about this prayer of Isaac, partly because there is so little information about Isaac; in this parsha alone it quickly shifts from Isaac to Jacob and Esau; and partly because Isaac’s prayer is answered. Given the costs of fertility treatments today, many couples would be overjoyed to have the opportunity to pray for a child rather than endure the medical procedures that are necessary in fertility clinics. But we know from childhood, that just praying for a puppy or a pony, will not make one appear. Isaac is the rare individual whose prayers are answered. What makes Isaac’s prayers so effective?
4. For many of the commentators, what makes Isaac’s prayers successful is that he feels the pain of his wife’s infertility. It is this pain that drives his prayer and brings about its success. It is explanations like these that call up the most difficult issue in prayer: What makes prayer effective? In Judaism, this is the crux of the difference between Keva and Kavana; the difference between the words that we pray and the meaning or intention we place behind them.
5. It is always easier to start with Keva, the words that we pray. Keva is the organized prayer service. It is the three paragraphs of the Shema. It is the nineteen blessings of the Amida. It is the order of the Psalms in the Pesuke D’Zimra. Keva is the accurate list of which blessings are appropriate for each occasion. Long before Siddurim were printed, Jews memorized the proper prayers for every occasion.
6. Keva, the way we organize prayer, is pretty important to our service. We know that when we want to remember something that is important we have to write it down and put the reminder where we can find it, see it and then remember what we are supposed to be doing. We make a shopping list so we can go to the store and not forget to buy something we really need. There are just too many distractions in the world for us to remember everything so we write up a list to keep us on task.
7. Our Siddur is just such a list. Our lives are full and complex and when we pray we don’t want to leave out something that is important. Is it possible that we could forget a prayer for the health of our loved ones? Could we forget to speak to God about helping us make a decision about something at work? I don’t think so. But we can forget the daily blessings that are working and then we begin to take them for granted. For example, waking up in the morning has many parts to it. Our awareness of the morning begins before we open our eyes, we have to get out from under our blankets, stretch our muscles, sit up in bed, put our feet on the floor, start to walk out of the room, get dressed and wash our faces. But each of these is a different reason to thank God. Awareness that we are living is one, seeing is another, having a blanket to keep us warm is a third reason to thank God. We must thank God that we are free to move, that we can sit up in bed, that there is solid ground under our feet that helps us walk. These blessings we might forget until after we have our morning coffee. So to make sure we don’t forget them, we write them down in their proper place in our siddur.
8. But there is a danger in writing down what we want to remember. It is just a small step from writing what we want to remember and making that list a god itself. That may sound silly when spoken by the Rabbi in shul but consider that a lot of time has been spent in developing technology to help us keep better lists. We don’t need paper and pencil for a list; we can make the list on our smart phones. That way we are also less likely to leave the list at home. The Tech magazines are all about smart appliances which means that your refrigerator will someday know what you have used up and will keep track of what you need to restock it. So while you are standing in the supermarket, you can contact your refrigerator on the internet and ask it what you need to buy. That way you don’t have to take the chance that you might forget something. You can laugh about it but you will realize how prophetic my words are when you go and buy your next refrigerator.
9. Some people already feel this way about the Siddur. They have to pray every word in it to prevent some terrible tragedy from happening. The words are less a reminder of what we should pray for than an incantation that will cause something to happen. God gave us these prayers so we better say them correctly. We fuss over how we recite each word and worry if we have the correct posture in order that our prayers should be accepted in heaven. Like speaking to our boss at work, we fear that one wrong word and we will incur the wrath of God. If I get the words wrong, then I will have bad luck all day, and maybe all week!
10. This is where Kavana comes in. Kavana assumes that we are not perfect and that God understands that. Angels may get their prayers right all the time but we human beings makes lots of mistakes. Sometimes we read words of prayer and we don’t understand what the prayers mean. Sometimes in the middle of a prayer, we get distracted and lose our train of thought. Sometimes, we are far away from a Siddur and suddenly we get a phone call or a text and we want to pray right at that moment, but we don’t have the proper words. Now what do we do?
11. Kavana tells us that while the words of prayer are like keys that open the doors of heaven, there is one key that opens every door. Our Resident Firefighter, Rick Bergman will tell you that a good ax can cut open almost every door there is. Kavana is that ax. The emotions in our heart, the love, the pain, the anxiety, the joy, all break through to heaven if they are true emotions we are feeling. We may not have a siddur when we are in the hospital with our life in the balance, but be assured that God hears not only the words we say but God also hears the fear in our hearts. We don’t need to say a word when we hold that newborn baby in our arms for the first time; our joy says all we need to say.
12. And yet, Kavana has its own dangers. We begin to just assume that God knows what is in our hearts. So we don’t make time to check in anymore. Like a lover who starts to take his or her beloved for granted, we don’t make the time to work on our relationship. Like the man who tells his wife after the wedding, “I told you I love you. If it changes, I’ll let you know”. When suddenly we feel the need to be close to God, we wonder if we have any right to bother God since we have been away so long. The parts of our heart that need to express gratitude, love and happiness with life have been forgotten so long we wonder if God still knows we exist. Besides, what kind of child would we be if the only time we called our parents was when we needed to borrow money? What kind of Jews would we be if the only time we thought about God was when we needed God to get us out of trouble?
13. Thus, what we need is balance. We need the Siddur and its fixed prayers to remind us of the many ways that God and humanity are connected. But we need to sometimes go beyond words and address the strong emotional ties between earth and heaven. Prayer is poetry. Sometimes you can just read it and sometimes it speaks to something deep inside us and it moves us to great joy or to many tears. And we find that we keep coming back to the poem to connect again with the deep emotions it calls up in our souls.
14. I look at the prayers in the Siddur as good friends. Friends who remind me of what kind of a person I am and what kind of a person I aspire to be. I make sure I am in touch with these friends every day, never wanting to leave one behind and thus forget a part of who I am. One of my teachers would call this “Normal Mysticism”, a mystical vision of God that arises not out of a miracle, but out of our daily lives when we live each day well.
15. But I am not ashamed to tell you that there are times when I come into this sanctuary, when it is dark and empty, to express my sincere gratitude for a prayer that was answered or to express my anger when I believe that God has done someone wrong. Even when I run out of words, my heart speaks for me and I know that God hears what I have to say; what I need to say. I may not have the words I need, but God understands me clearly.
16. Do we need to come to shul to pray? I don’t think so. Do we need to be in a minyan to pray? It is probably not a requirement. Do we have to all be on the same page? Clearly not. Do we all have to stand up and sit down together? Nope. So why do we need to be in shul together? Because when we join together in prayer, we give ourselves the space to feel God’s presence in our lives. We know that we are not alone in our joy or in our pain; we know that we will set the time aside to strengthen our connection to God and we come here to learn and study, so that not only can God hear our voice, but we can stop to hear what God has to say to us.
17. God answered Isaac’s prayer not because he had the right words, but because he carried in his heart the pain of his wife’s infertility and it was that pain that moved God to answer Isaac’s prayer. It was just one part of Isaac’s prayer life that he learned from his father Abraham and one that he will pass on to his son, Jacob as well. Prayer may have a structure, a Keva, and that structure is designed for us to climb to God. Sometimes, however, we need God to come to us, and that is the call we make through Kavana. We can lead a congregation in prayer, in the Keva, but we can’t force Kavana. That work can only be done in our hearts.
18. May we learn to pray in balance, balance between head and heart, between Keva and Kavana, balance between our needs and our gratitude and balance between our love for God and our love for each other. All of these make up the foundation of prayer leaving us ready to enter God’s gates of kindness, of gratitude and of love. May our prayers open our lives to all of God’s blessings as we say … Amen and Shabbat Shalom