

Rabbi Mark Wildes, MJE Rosh Hashanah 5783/2022

THE BEAUTY WHICH SURROUNDS US

(Rosh Hashanah Eve)

On a cold January morning at a metro station in Washington DC, a middle-aged man begins to play the violin. He plays six Bach pieces for 45 minutes. It was rush hour during which literally thousands of people went through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by and finally a middle-aged man noticed a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds and but then hurried up to meet his schedule. A minute later the violinist received his first dollar tip. A woman threw a dollar in the musician's bucket and without stopping continued to walk. A few minutes later someone leaned against a wall to listen to the violinist, but the man looked at his watch and started to walk again. The one who paid the most attention was a three-year old boy. He stopped for a moment, but his mother encouraged him to keep walking. He tried to stay to listen, but his mother pushed a bit harder until the boy continued to walk, turning his head so he could get another glance at the violinist. This happened with a number of children walking with their mothers and fathers. All the parents, without exception, forced them to move on.

In the 45 minutes the musician played, out of the thousands of people who passed, six people stopped and stayed a bit, twenty people gave the violinist money but continued to walk their normal pace. The violinist collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over, no one applauded, no-one noticed someone had stopped playing, no one recognized anything different.

The violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the greatest and most accomplished musicians in the world. He was playing one of the most intricate musical pieces ever written with a violin worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days before his playing in that subway, Joshua Bell sold out a theatre in Boston where tickets sold for at least \$100 a seat. He has played with the greatest symphonies in the world, won a Grammy award and has played on Oscar winning soundtracks. The 300-year-old Stradivarius violin Bell was using was made in 1713 and was used to play his *Romance of the Violin* which sold more than 5,000,000 copies and remained at the top of classical music charts for 54 weeks.

And yet in that subway station almost no one noticed him. Almost no one recognized the brilliance of his musical ability, the magnificent and complex song he was playing. How could this be? How could the most incredible music, played by one of the most accomplished musicians, on such a valuable instrument go almost unnoticed?

The sad reality is we often fail to perceive the beauty that exists around us. Joshua Bell agreed to play incognito in the metro station as part of a social experiment organized by the Washington Post to determine how we as humans perceive beauty. Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we appreciate the beauty around us? This experiment demonstrates how easily distracted we are and how much we are challenged to recognize the beautiful things in life. And that's where prayer comes in. We spend a great deal of time over Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur praying because prayer is designed to enable us to see the beauty we often fail to recognize. To appreciate the things in life we take for granted. So many of the Tefilot/prayers we say over Rosh Hashanah and next week Yom Kippur reference the many everyday blessings we have in our lives. Every Silent Devotion we recite (we will be reciting one in just a few minutes in the Ma'ariv/Evening service and tomorrow twice - once during Shacharit and once during Musaf and a number of times on Yom Kippur) begins with a

section called “shevach” which recounts God’s handiwork in the creation of the universe and the Silent Devotion always ends with a section called “hoda’ah” which means thanks during which we try to develop an *attitude of gratitude* for those things we so often take for granted.

As Jews we start our day every morning with the *Modeh Ani* prayer thanking God for just allowing us to awake, to arise in the morning, for the gift of life and we begin our prayers every day, as we will do tomorrow, with the section called *Birchot Hashachar* during which we thank God for those things in life we take for granted. Things like our sight, our ability to walk, that we have clothing to wear ... all things that allow us to be more mindful of the gifts we have in our lives and the beauty that surrounds us in this world.

But prayer also allows us to see the beauty within ourselves as well. The Hebrew verb to pray is “*hitpallel*” which means to judge oneself – it’s reflexive because praying allows one to introspect in such a way as to delve beneath the surface and look at ourselves in an open and honest manner. Prayer becomes an opportunity to *check in* with ourselves, taking note of the way we are living and behaving. Thus, if a certain prayer touches on the way we speak (which many of the High Holiday prayers do), we can use that as an opportunity to reflect on how we’re faring with appropriate speech. Are we being as careful as we should? Or if a prayer discusses honesty and integrity, that will hopefully trigger any issues with which we are currently grappling, having to do with being honest in our business dealings.

But there’s a well-known philosophical issue which arises when we pray: How can we really ask for things to be different? God decrees something and we say we'd prefer something else? I know this is the reality O Lord, but I'd prefer a different one! How can we do this?

The great Jewish philosopher Rabbi Joseph Albo suggested that praying is not intended to change God’s mind or His decree; what prayer is ultimately designed to change is *us*. The act of *Tefilah* makes us better, improves who we are spiritually and as a result, we then become worthy of better judgment since we’re not the same people we were *before* we prayed.

In addition, within the context of *Tefilah* we may change because we hopefully become inspired to take on something new. The prime example of this is *Tefilat Chana*: Chana, the prophetess struggles with being childless, and in her prayers, she vows to dedicate her son to God if He would only bless her with one. She bargains with God. We too, when praying, are moved to take on a new mitzvah or do better at one we've already been observing.

So, whether it's the experience of *Tefilah* itself or we’re inspired to take on something new, prayer has the power to transform *us* into different people. That, in turn, changes our reality, for the decree which the Almighty “had in mind” *before* we prayed, no longer applies since we have changed *ourselves* via the prayer experience.

One last point on prayer: The Talmud teaches that before we ask/request something from God we must first recite words of praise. This principle is derived from non-other than Moshe who, before asking to enter the land of Israel, first uttered words of praise: "*My lord, God you have begun to show your servant Your greatness and your strong hand for what power is there in the heavens or on earth that can perform according to your deeds and according to your mighty acts?*" (Dvarim 3:23)

Only afterward did Moshe ask: *let me now cross and see the good land on the other side* (Ibid, 3:24). Why do our Sages pick Moshe's prayer as the source for the principle of praising before asking? After all, Moshe's prayer was denied! Why not choose a prayer that was received favorably?

One answer is to teach us the value of prayer which may not result with the desired answer. Even though Moshe's plea was ultimately turned down, that encounter still had meaning and value. This is a hugely relevant issue for us: what about all the prayers and requests we have made of God that were never answered in the positive? Were they, therefore, a waste of time? Absolutely not! For prayer isn't simply about getting what we want. Prayer is ultimately about having a relationship with God which is just not possible without communication.

That's why prayer can be recited alone at home and not in a synagogue because it's all about developing a relationship.

Having said that, we value Tefilah b'tizbbur/communal because we are affected by our surroundings. There's a Japanese fish called the Koi Fish. If you put the Koi, it into a small tank, it grows to about 3-4 inches. If you place it into a larger tank it can grow to 6-7 inches if you move it to a pond - a foot and half and if you put the Koi into a huge lake where it can really stretch out, it will grow up to 3 feet long. Sort of the way we are. We grow when we're surrounded by the right people, in the right community. There's a famous story of a little boy whose father becomes annoyed because his son keeps running into the forest to pray. "Don't you know that God is the same everywhere?" - the father asks. "Yea", the little boy answers, "but I'm not the same everywhere".

Also, when we pray as part of a community, we are more likely to pray on behalf of others. It's no coincidence that virtually all of the Jewish prayers are written in the plural. In fact, next week on Yom Kippur when we ask for forgiveness for sins committed the *Al-Cheyv* list follows from Aleph through Taf, ie-A through Z, not because any one of us committed every one of those transgressions, but because we are praying for forgiveness on behalf of the entire community. The Talmud says that one who prays for others is more likely to get their own prayers favorably answered. And so Tefilah not only enables us to reflect upon ourselves and our relationship with God, but it can also help gets us out of ourselves so we can become more conscious of other people's needs as well. As the famous verse in the Torah tells us: "*Ki baisi bais tefilah yikareh lechol ha'amim*". The Temple was a place to pray for all humankind.

The prayers were carefully composed by the great Jewish Sages and Prophets who were masters of Torah and its profound philosophy. Whether we sing these prayers in the Hebrew or recite them in the English (which we're going to do a little of each at this service), the prayers permit us to notice things about ourselves and the world around us; to recognize the beauty and the blessings we have; to hear the music that's being played, and to see the flowers that are blooming. If you're Hebrew is a little rusty feel free to use the transliteration and if you don't know a song just hum along anyway.

Humming is also considered a form of prayer.

If we don't have a moment to stop and listen to one of the best musicians in the world playing some of the best music ever written, how many other things are we missing? Rosh Hashanah is a time for us to notice of our blessings and a time to use prayer to sensitize ourselves to becoming more aware of the beauty which surrounds us. Let's take advantage of the time we have with each other these High Holidays to become more sensitive and mindful of that which may have gone unnoticed. May our prayers uplift and inspire us, may they be received favorably before Hashem and in that merit may each of us be inscribed in the book of long life, happiness, and peace.