

OUR INNER DIALOGUE

Shabbat Shuvah, 2015

Shabbat shalom.

On this Shabbat we are in the midst of the holiest time of the year – the *Yamim Nora-im*, the “Terrible Days” when we confront ourselves, unflinchingly review our actions over the past year and resolve to choose a better path for the year to come. Repentance and renewal are our themes.

I sometimes wonder what we actually think when we stand here and pray, and hear the texts and music that constitute our worship. I try to imagine what is really going on in our hearts and souls, for those who go through this experience in a serious way. I imagine, if I could but tune in to the proper frequencies, that I might hear something like the following:

It wasn't easy for me to get here tonight. It seems to be always one frantic scramble. Always something to do, something to get, some place to be. And now what? I suppose the rabbi will go on like he does every year about repentance and renewal and finding new directions. Blah blah blah – it's always “we should do this, we should do that.” That's his job, but I don't need any reminder of my obligations. For me, life is one obligation after another. I'm tired of obligations. When will the service end?

Boy, am I tired! I wish my parents hadn't forced me to go to the service. I don't want to be here. What do I know about all these prayers? I don't even understand them. And I can't believe the others even if I do understand them. I want to be with my friends, go to that party, have some fun.

Man, I'm tired. That was rough on the course this morning. When will I ever learn to play a decent game? It was relaxing, all right, but I'm not as young as I used to be. And all that talk of the fellows about the big deals they've landed. Why can't I be lucky? Now the rabbi is starting to speak. I wonder what he's going to say. He's so lucky he only has to work on weekends, while I have to sweat it out day after day.

Oh, my tired bones. I wonder if I look as old as I feel. It was nice to be young, to stand straight and walk fast. It seems so long ago, I hardly remember it. And I'm not just tired, and also so lonely. I miss him (or her) so much. Everyone tells me

not to be so sorry for myself. But when you're alone with your thoughts and your fears, how can you not be sorry for yourself?

I follow the prayer book. I listen to what is being said. But I just don't have any faith any more. Once I had faith. I believed in a God who cares, in the comfort of prayer, in the inspiration of the Bible. But now I've lost it all. Too much has happened to me. I have suffered too much. How much can one person take and not get tired of it all?

I hope I can stay awake through the service. It hasn't been an easy time, with the wild stock market, the costs, the competition. But I've been lucky so far, not being found out. I love my wife, but this is different. It takes me away from my problems. It makes me feel younger. I hate getting older. If only that guilt didn't stare me in the face at night when I try to sleep. It's hard to run from guilt. And I'm tired of running.

I'm tired of his antics. He thinks I don't know. What kind of fool does he think I am? I'm human, too. I need to love and to be loved, too, and I can only take so much. I should tell him, but I guess I'm afraid of what will happen. And yet I'm miserable. I wish I knew what to do.

You don't really love me, he says to us. Why, we've given him all the love we could. We worked hard, sacrificed, to get where we are today, for his sake. He has everything. Why does he turn against all the things that are important to us? Why does he have to wear his hair like that? And why does he have to defy our feelings about morals, right in front of us? We're tired of all this. How will it end?

God, what do they want from me? I appreciate what they've done for me, but I can't tell them that every minute. I can't show them my appreciation by living in their world, by looking, talking and behaving the way they do. I'm sorry if I hurt them, but it's a different world now and I wish they'd recognize that. This isn't the 19th century. Things have changed. Their world isn't so hot, either, so ideal, so perfect. Besides, I've got to live my own life, and not be a hypocrite.

So I stand before you, your rabbi, and imagine your innermost voices. Everyone has a story. I've been leading High Holy Day services now for more than 40 years, and every year the words speak to me in a different way. And so I also wonder what happens when we try to respond to our innermost thoughts and anxieties, fears and critiques: What would happen if our voices led us bend a little, let the

spirit and purpose of this hour touch us a little, if only we would let the mask of cynicism and resignation fall a little, if only we were to reveal our truer, nobler selves. It might sound like this:

I was thinking earlier about all my obligations, how tired of them I sometimes get. But I really shouldn't complain too much. I'm alive, I'm well. And to be alive is to have obligations. I should be thankful for those who depend on me. What would I do without them? Help me with strength to go on meeting my obligations. Help me in the most important obligation I have – to face life with courage.

I think I understand why my parents want me to be here with them. They want me to sit with them as they sat with their parents on the holidays. They want me to grow up with good memories of our religion and family. I shouldn't object to that. And that's what I should pray for: to have enough maturity not to fight with my parents over everything. Help me to appreciate not only what I expect of everyone, but also what they expect of me.

Here I've been griping about the fellows on the golf course upsetting me with all their talk of big deals. But you know, they have problems, too. What's what I should pray for: To know the difference between enough and more than enough. Who knows how many years I have left? Help me not to waste them. Help me to enjoy life with my wonderful family.

I have to admit that I get some satisfaction being sorry for myself in my old age. It gets attention and even a little pity. Well, maybe I should fool everyone and show them I don't need sympathy. That's what I should pray for: for self-respect, and respect from others. Help me to win that respect by not making old age seem like a nightmare. The autumn of life isn't all that bad. I have nice memories. Help me to be thankful that the turmoil of youth is behind me, that now I can be calmer and more patient. Help me to set an example of serenity and wisdom my years have given me.

Why do I get so upset that there are Jews who believe in Judaism? If that enables them to face life, all the better. Perhaps I'm fighting something in myself. Yes, that's what I should pray for: for more tolerance. Help me to see that it was religion and faith that created the Jewish people in the first place. Help me to know something of that faith for my own life.

Who am I fooling, trying not to feel guilty about the lie I've been living? What about integrity – doesn't that matter? My loyalty to those who love me – doesn't that matter? My need to learn the difference between boyhood lust and adult love – doesn't that matter? Help me to wake up from the dream of adolescence. Help me to measure up to my adulthood.

It's funny, I've been sitting here stewing about him, about his unfaithfulness, and it suddenly occurs to me that in all honesty, I haven't been honest with him either. Not unfaithful literally, maybe, but in other ways that are important to a man. It's time we really talked. And when we do, I'll need to pray: Help me to help him. Help me to save him from himself. Help me to see things clearly. Help me to bring back some of the freshness and sincerity we both knew when we first met, when we were really in love.

My friends, God knows it is not up to me to judge anyone in this congregation for their thoughts, their trials. What we are really meant to do here is to judge ourselves, which in Judaism is the very meaning of prayer. For how can we turn to the larger tasks that face us when our spirits are torn, our minds divided?

God, your people call out to You for help. Show us the way to our hearts that we may be comforted, filled with understand, and dedicated to your service. Amen