



Parshat Shemini
April 18, 2020 — 24 Nisan 5780
“Lord, Please Help Me Be Gentle With Myself.”
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There is a nurse in Florida who lives in a town that is blessed not to have much Covid-19 activity. When she heard about the surge happening in our Commonwealth this week, she decided to help. She left her husband, her children, and her home in Florida and got right to work in one of our hospitals treating those infected with the virus. She leaves all she knows behind to run *towards* the population that the rest of us are running *away from*. She was asked by an NPR reporter whether she was worried about getting infected. No, she said. She will take all proper precautions—but what she is worried about is whether she is doing her part.

Listening to this NPR segment, I had two reactions.

The first, of course, is reverence for this courageous and inspiring nurse who leaves the safety of her home and family to come to the front lines of a city in the moment of its surge. There are no words to begin to capture her heroism, and the heroism of all of the medical professionals treating Covid patients. Respect. Admiration. Gratitude. Awe. That is the first response.

But then there comes a secondary response. This is another part of the Covid 19 story that is also real, that is deeply felt by many people, and that is underexplored. What about those who feel that I am *not* stepping up. I am *not* being heroic. I am *not* that nurse who leaves Florida in search of treating the surge.

I am eating too much. Stress eating. Did I just have that entire carton of salted caramel ice cream? Was it a pint or a quart?

I am drinking too much. I just need that glass or two at the end of the day, every day, to calm my nerves. I never used to do that.

I am sleeping too little. I am having crazy weird dreams. Every morning I get up exhausted, not rested, I look at myself in the mirror, I groan, and I wonder how am I going to make it through another day?

I am worried about money. I am worried about my job.

I am worried about my kids. I don't want them going into free fall.

I am anxious. I am depressed. I can barely keep my own home life running. How in the world does this nurse leave her home, her husband, her children, and head to the surge? Her heroism is amazing—and one more thing to make me feel bad about myself. I am not stepping up to this moment.

If you are feeling like your noblest self is not emerging in this crisis, I want to offer you a prayer. It is not a prayer I have ever seen in any prayerbook. It is not a prayer I have ever seen in the Torah or Talmud. It is a simple prayer that I say. It is a simple prayer that comes from my heart which I offer to you, with the hope that it might be helpful to you.

Lord, please help me be gentle with myself.

In this prayer I ask God to help me give myself a break. Help me cut myself some slack.

Is this prayer a valid Jewish prayer? Or is it some new-age, self-serving mantra that would not cut muster with traditional Jewish notions of prayer?

Jewish prayer makes us take a hard look at ourselves. Where have we failed? Let's confess honestly our shortcomings. *Ashamnu, bagadnu, gazalnu, deibarnu dophi*, the confessional that we sing together every Yom Kippur, we abuse, we betray, we are cruel, we destroy, that's traditional Jewish prayer.

Jewish prayer asks us to be better people, to be more than we have been. We have all said a thousand times the glorious words at the end of the daily and Shabbat Amidah. *Elohei netzor leshoni m'eirah u'sefatai midaber mirmah*. My God, keep my tongue from evil, my lips from speaking falsehood. That's traditional Jewish prayer.

Jewish prayer is focused on the welfare of others. The *misheberakh l'cholim*, the prayer for healing we offer every day and every night, asks God to heal others who are ailing. That's traditional Jewish prayer.

But my prayer—"Lord, please help me be gentle with myself"—does not take me to task. Does not ask me to be better. Does not direct God's attention to others. Only asks God to help me be okay with where I am, and what I am doing, right now. Asks God to help me be okay even if my less noble angels are emerging instead of my nobler angels. Perhaps there is a reason you cannot find this prayer in any siddur.

And yet, for all of these reservations, I believe this is a good Jewish prayer. The Book of Numbers, chapter 9, offers crucial guidance here, a passage that we read on Hol Hamoed Pesach. It is called Pesach Sheni, the second Passover.

God tells us that the Jewish people are to offer a Paschal sacrifice and tell the story of the Exodus on the 14th of Nisan—the biblical version of the seder. This command is hugely important. It is literally the first mitzvah directed to the Jewish people in the Torah. It is repeated over and over again and is framed as a mitzvah that we are to do, throughout the generations, forever. To not do this mitzvah of telling the story and offering the sacrifice is to take yourself out of the Jewish people. That's how big and defining a mitzvah, it is.

That's also why this institution of Pesach Sheni, the second Passover, is so important. God tells Moses, listen, I understand life can get in the way, even of the most important

principles. God lays out two categories where it is okay if an Israelite does not offer the sacrifice and tell the story on the 14th of Nisan.

One is so real and relatable. What if you are out of town, working on a job. You are *b'derech r'chokah*, on a long journey. Yes, telling the Passover story is definingly important, but life can get in the way. You have business out of town. You can't do Passover this month. I get it, says God. OK, do it in a month.

The second is a more technical biblical thing, but has a deep human resonance. If you are *tamei l'nefesh*, if you are ritually defiled because you have come into contact with a dead person, you don't have the ritual purity necessary to offer the sacrifice, so offer it in a month instead. In other words, things happen, in a home, in a family, to the people you love, that affect your ability to be in a communal moment. You're not a machine. You're a human with a heart. If you can't feel the national story because there has been a death in your family, because your world is overturned, OK. Do it in a month.

In both of these cases, you are out of town, there has been a death, God emerges as the God we know from the Thirteen Attributes of Mercy. *Adonai, Adonai, el rachum v'chanun, erech apayim v'rav chesed v'emet*. The Lord! The Lord! A God compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness. This is the God of second chances.

That's my God. That's the God who gave the Israelites a break when they could not do Passover at the appointed time because life got in the way. That's the God who gives us a break during the Coronavirus crisis, when so much of our life, and the lives of those we love, are out of our control.

I was speaking recently with a dear friend of many years, a member of our shul, about how he is doing in this crisis. He shared that he really misses the temple. He cannot enter into

the building, as he has so regularly for so many years. But he walks *around* the building. He at least gets *to see* this building that is important to him. He also observed that our streamed services have been important to him. He said he finds it comforting to see the clergy team. Comforting to see our worship spaces. To see, even in the Covid 19 lockdown, that prayers are still being uttered in the Gann Chapel. Prayers are still being uttered in the Rabbi Samuel Chiel Sanctuary. Not the same as being there, but comforting to see and hear the prayers, even from behind a screen.

One Shabbat morning he had his screen on to our Shabbat morning service. It was comforting background noise. He was doing other things in his office while our service streamed. He was multi-tasking on God. At a certain point early in the service, the Bat Mitzvah starts to lead parts of shacharit. He said he understands that bnei mitzvah do this. His own kids did it. They had their turn on the bimah. So while he always prefers listening to the beautiful davening of Elias, he was going to listen respectfully to this young woman's davening. It was her turn to lead, it was his job as an adult member of the congregation to listen respectfully—while he was still doing his other things.

But then he noticed that she was leading the service from her kitchen. Here she was, 13 years old, emerging into her Jewish adulthood in the middle of the Covid-19 lockdown, tallit over her shoulders, reciting the shema from her home, absolutely determined not to let a pandemic get in her way. It melted his heart. He stopped multi-tasking on God. He put on his yarmulke. He put on his tallit. He took out his siddur. And he davened the entire service with her, and with us.

The pathos of this moment claimed him. I believe the same is true for us and for God.
The pathos of this moment claims us all. It is a dire time. We could all use a little extra mercy.
So I pray: Lord, please help me be gentle with myself.

Amen.