

I offer you this analogy -- Rosh Hashanah is to prayer as the Boston Marathon is to a walk around Reed's Lake. If regular prayer is like a quiet walk around a lake, then Rosh Hashanah prayer is like running the Boston marathon.

The first and most obvious comparison is that both the Boston Marathon and High Holiday services draw quite a crowd!

Seriously, a stroll around a portion of Reed's Lake lends itself to quiet contemplation and appreciation -- a beautiful natural setting, the time simply to enjoy the walk. A prayer of appreciation, thanking God for a new child or grandchild, for recovery from illness or the celebration of a Bar Mitzvah is a simple, spontaneous natural show of gratitude, coming right from the heart.

On the other hand, the intense liturgy of Rosh Hashanah is literally and thematically complicated and emotionally draining, and to appreciate the full grandeur of the experience takes training, just as running the Boston Marathon takes a well trained runner through a range of physical and emotional experiences, from an exhilarating beginning to the extruciating pain of heartbreak hill six miles from the end, to an exhausting finish.

It takes a lot to appreciate prayer on Rosh Hashanah. However, even prayer on a regular Shabbat morning can be an overwhelming experience. Jewish liturgy is a finely crafted work of art -- but just as the average, untrained eye cannot pick up all of the subtle details of a series of painting of haystacks by Monet, so too understanding Jewish prayer is an experience of art appreciation. I'd like each one of you to leave here today feeling that you connected with God in prayer in a meaningful way, so I'd like to walk you through one prayer - slowly - as an introduction to the richness of our liturgy.

The prayer I'd like to walk through with you is called Birkhot Hashaḥar, the morning blessings. The setting for these blessings is the process of waking up in the morning, although it has been transplanted to the early morning synagogue service. It can be found on page 60 in your Mahzor, and we're going to go through it line by line, we'll set the scene for each berakha and then recite it together.

Let's begin by thinking back to the very moment each morning when you first wake up and realize that you are alive and conscious. It is still dark, either because the sun has not yet risen or because you haven't yet opened your eyes. During the brief moments before you are fully conscious, it is as if you exist only in a limited fashion within your mind. You realize nothing else but that you are awake and that you are alive, and we say:

The Source of Blessing are You, Adonai our God, who enables creatures to distinguish between night and day. Together:

*BaAEm "h asher natan lasekhvi l'havḥin bein yom uvein layla.*

As we lie in bed for a few moments after waking up, we begin to remember what we did yesterday and what we need to do today. Imagine that your mind is like a computer. When you first turn on the computer, it does not know what it is. The first thing it does is "boot up," load its operating system. It learns what it is, what software is loaded on it, and it explores connections to peripheral devices. Imagine if you woke up each morning with no memory of who you were yesterday. In the movie "Groundhog Day," Bill Murray finds himself in such a world, in which he is the only person who know that the same day is repeating over and over again. Every other person wakes up each morning and repeats Groundhog day over and over again with no memory of having experienced it before. They blithely do the same things again

and again without any variation. In the real world, we wake up and the memory of who we are, our history, comes back to us. We remember who we were and what we did yesterday, and have the chance to advance ourselves by building on today. Our memory is our identity. Every morning that we wake up and are aware of who we are, we acknowledge our gratitude to God for making us in God's image; for giving us the privilege of serving God as Jews; and for making us free people. We say together the next three berakhot:

*BaAEm" h She-asani b' tzalmo.*

*BaAEm" h she-asani yisrael.*

*BaAEm" h She-asani ben horin.*

Consider next in our journey of waking up in the morning the miracle of opening your eyes and seeing. Vision is a complicated process. The electrical impulses transmitted by the eyes along neural pathways to the brain need to be interpreted. The brain needs to understand color, shape, perspective, shadow, distance, depth, dimension, and texture. The information that our eyes give our brains is overwhelming -- our brains need to process it and learn how to interpret what we are seeing, and tell the rest of our body to react: a baseball coming at our head means we need to duck or raise our hands; a little face approaching our head means we need to pucker our lips for a kiss; an apple approaching our face means that we need to open our mouth and take a bite. We look at our friend's face and we see more than two eyes, a nose, and a mouth surrounded by cheeks -- we perceive happiness, sadness, anxiety, anger, curiosity, disinterest, or numerous other shades of emotion. People who have been blind since birth and gotten some sight restored surgically do not suddenly get normal vision, because their brain does not know what to do with the signals it is receiving. We open our eyes, and say a berakha, thanking God for giving us sight. Together, we say:

*BaAEm" h pokeah ivrim.*

Next, feel the ambient temperature around you. We are the only creature on earth that needs fire to survive. Other animals have built in layers of insulation or fur to keep themselves warm -- we need to encase ourselves in warm clothes and artificially heat our environments. Do you feel a chill? Are you too warm? Chances are, your body is hard at work regulating your temperature, so even if you feel slightly warm or cold, your internal temperature is very close to a constant 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. For this, we give thanks to God who clothes the naked for keeping us warm:

*BaAEm" h malbish arumim.*

We now begin to move. At first, our muscles and joints are stiff. They may loosen up with a little stretching, or we may feel some background stiffness and pain throughout the day. Go through your body with me, and feel your limbs. Feel each muscle group in your left foot, and then your right foot. Flex your calves, your knees, and your thighs. Tighten your stomach muscles, and twist your spine right and left, so you feel your shoulders pulling slightly. Stretch out your arms, feel your biceps and triceps working, and wiggle your fingers. Turn your neck to the left and right, side to side. Be aware of your muscles, joints, tendons, and other connective tissue, and let us express our gratitude to God for restoring our range of movement, for releasing the bound:

*BaAEm" h matir asurim.*

If you can, I'm going to ask you to stand up from your seat. If you cannot stand up completely, then try to straighten your body in your seat. But wait - not quickly, the way we

usually stand up or straighten ourselves. I want you to move very slowly, as slowly as you are able. Feel each muscle working in turn to raise and balance your upper body on your lower body, and your entire body on two relatively small feet. This most refined sense of balance is a skill that we may lose as we age, but consider even the strength and balance and stability it takes to stretch out an arm, or even hold your head upright, and we say thank God, who straightens one who is bent over:

*BaAEm" h zokef k'fufim.*

You may sit.

Do you ever think about the various structures underneath your feet or surrounding you? The infrastructure of a city -- lines carrying sewage, water, and gas; poles carrying electricity, telephone, and cable. Constructed roads on which to travel, rivers and creeks and ponds and lakes created and/or modified by engineers to remain within their boundaries so we need not worry too much about flooding. Strata of rock beneath us which sometimes contain valuable minerals or metals, and sometimes contain pockets of trapped natural gas, oil, or coal which we use to power our world. A water table into which drains surface water, usually unfit to drink, and naturally filter it through layers and layers of rock so we can pump it back up and drink it.

What happens when the foundation, this structure built around us, is damaged? Last April, many of us were very cold as a storm of rain, ice, and snow knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of people for as much as a week. More recently, millions of people from New York to Michigan spent 2-3 days without power and safe water as a result of the blackout, and hundreds of thousands have lost power due to hurricane Isabel. As stable as our world may feel most of the time, severe weather, earthquakes, or freak occurrences shake up our complacency, and thus we daily remind ourselves that God established the foundation of the dry land amidst the water, and every morning that we wake up to a basically stable world, we say:

*BaAEm" h roka ha'aretz al hamayim.*

As complex and fragile as the infrastructure of our cities is, our bodies are more complex and run with amazing efficiency. Each organ and vessel of the body has to do its job with near absolute precision for us to survive. Too much or not enough of minute quantities of various hormones can send us into a diabetic coma, or cause our organs to fail. The heart must pump oxygenated blood which nourishes the cells of our body, repairs damage, and removes waste; the digestive track must break down our food, extract nutrition and send away the waste. If even one of these systems fails to work properly, we will need major medical intervention. To God, who provides for all our needs, we say:

*BaAEm" h she-asani kol tzorkhi.*

Now, I want you to stand again if you can, and move yourself forward, very slowly. Appreciate each muscle working in turn to propel your body in the direction you want to go. If you are standing, appreciate the balance necessary to move your body on two feet. If you are sitting in a wheelchair, appreciate the ability to make the chair move, however it may be propelled. We say to God - we are grateful for the ability to move our bodies -- we say:

*BaAEm" h asher heikin mitza'adei gaver.*

You may be seated.

Now we are prepared to face the day. Every day, we are presented with external and internal challenges to overcome so that we can make some kind of contribution to the betterment of the world using the gifts that God has given us. Realize that we are the only species that

communicates abstract ideas using spoken and written language; that ponders its own existence; that articulates a relationship with a Divine Creator. Such is what it means to be created in the image of God. For strengthening us with courage and crowning us with glory, we say:

*BaAEm" h ozer Yisrael bigvurah.*

*BaAEm" h oter Yisrael Btif'arah.*

Wow -- we've just barely gotten out of bed, and look how much work our bodies have done. We conclude with one more blessings:

*BaAEm" h ha-noten la-yaef koah.* We are grateful to God, who restores vigor to the weary.

This is what prayer is all about. Prayer has layers and layers of meaning, but at its heart it is all about being thankful, and expressing that gratitude to God. May your prayers today be offered with kavanah and joy; may your prayers express a sense of gratitude for the good moments of the past year, and may they be a balm upon your sorrow for the painful moments; and though your prayer, repentance, and good deeds, may you be written in the book of life for the coming year. Amen.