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The *Mi Shebeirach* Prayer

Kol Nidre 5775

October 4, 2014

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I begin this evening with confession. This August, we were in the Lakes Basin area of the Sierras for a week. On our long hike day, up on the mountain, I was sitting watching the wind make gentle ripples on the surface of Silver Lake, just as we read in the Torah on Parshat Bereishit: "רוח אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם ... a divine wind was hovering over the face of the water..." And I looked up, and I saw cloud and sky and mountain top; and at that precise moment, everything I wanted to say to you tonight at this precise moment came together! So I hastened to capture my thoughts...and realized that we had come to this very mountain lake so that we could get "off the grid."No computer, no ipad. O! A pen, low tech but OK... no paper... Sorry. So what I offer tonight is the best I've been able to reconstruct of what I had wanted to say ...

I've been thinking a lot about my father and mother. They always had Shabbat at home; they attended synagogue regularly and never missed a High Holy day service; they were deeply Jewish individuals. My father was, like his parents, a committed Zionist, and unlike them, an educated scientist; he was shaped by his parents' experiences as immigrants and his own life narrative which was darkened by anti-Semitism at critical moments. As I have told some of you, my compassion for and my understanding of my father have grown immensely over the nineteen years since his death. How I yearn now for the conversations we didn't have.

When he was in the hospital dying of cancer, a kind member of his Conservative synagogue came to visit. Despite his pain, my father was gracious – who was this stranger? What was he doing here? The gentleman was a member of the Bikkur Cholim committee, and volunteered to visit hospitalized members of the congregation and to pray with them or to offer a *Mi sheberech* prayer on their behalf. In his gracious manner, my father politely told him that he wasn't interested and to please go away and find someone else to visit. Although a life-long supporter of and active participant in the synagogue, faith and – prayer as an expression of it – was, to my knowledge, of no interest to him and had no place in his inner life.

Over the last several years, I have had a series of health scares of one kind or another. All eventually resolved themselves in the fullness of time. But last year, just after the High Holy days, I went through a season of tests and scans and unhelpful internet searches before the worrisome symptoms slipped away. And each Shabbat, here on the *bimah*, I would lead the *Mi sheberech* prayer – and the gathered congregation would say the names of the people who were in your hearts; some very quietly, some spoken out loud. Often, I know of whom you are speaking, and you and your loved ones in turn became part of my prayer; sometimes, we just



look at each other and share a moment of prayer together. *Eil na, refah na... God, please heal.*
(*Eil na*)

Over time, I became increasingly aware of my own loneliness – yearning to share my fear and wanting to be held with *rachamim*, compassion (although “compassion” does not fully express the force of the underlying Hebrew root which suggests the embracing protection of the womb). I felt like I was the biblical Esau, jealous of his brother, Jacob, who had monopolized their parent’s blessings: “בְּרַכְנִי גַם-אֲנִי אָבִי” – “בְּרַכְנִי גַם-אֲנִי אָבִי” – “Bless me too, Father,” Esau asked, lifting up his voice and crying.”ⁱ

After some weeks of inner fear and oh such embarrassment, I asked some of you to include me in your *Mi sheberech*. I was grateful to be held and so ashamed that I was betraying my father. But I wonder: if my rationalist, secular father had been at the synagogue, would he have said my name, too? Can we tolerate a measure of inconsistency without indicting ourselves for hypocrisy?

Our Rabbis caution against relying on supernatural intervention to help change difficult circumstances. The Talmud teaches: "One should never put oneself in a dangerous situation and say, 'A miracle will save me.' Perhaps the miracle will not come."ⁱⁱ Of course most difficult circumstances aren't ones in which we have placed ourselves but rather those that have simply unfolded that way; no one sought out the tumor or the diagnosis. Yet already two thousand years ago, our Rabbis cautioned against “*t'filat shav*,” often translated as “false” or “vain prayer” – but perhaps a better rendering might be “useless prayer” – the petition to change what has already been determined and therefore cannot be changed. Thus, our Rabbis teach, if you are driving home and hear the siren of a fire truck coming your way, a person should not say, “Please let it not be my house!” Whatever house is in on fire, its already burning! Similarly, when we go in for the x-ray or biopsy, we should not pray “Oh God, don't let it be malignant ...” because whatever it is, it already is and this is a fact which cannot be changed.

But, in fact, this is so often the nature of our prayer; our prayer comes too late, asking for what is beyond God's power to grant –and then we are disappointed and turn away from prayer and turn away from God. Immediately after being ordained as a rabbi, I came to San Francisco to lead a congregation serving the gay community during the height of the AIDS epidemic. With illness and death all around us, the community found comfort in words of prayer. But with so many people dying each week, we could not say the words of the *Mi shebeirach* as passed down for us:

“שלח רפואה שלמה רפואת הנפש ורפואת הגוף השתא בעגלה ובזמן קריב...”

Send a complete healing, a healing of spirit and a healing of body, speedily and soon...”
We found that this traditional text, in our context, was *tefilat shav*, an unreasonable prayer; for so many, healing in any meaningful fashion could not be expected. But surrounded by illness and death, it was essential that we held all the ill among us in our prayers and recited a prayer that we could believe in; a ritual that could hold the people we loved and the truth of the world in which we lived. So we modified the traditional language, yearning still for *refu'ah sheleimah*, “complete healing,” but not asking or expecting it in a measurable time. We prayed: “God, let your spirit rest upon all who are ill and comfort them. May we know together a time



of complete healing, a healing of the body and the healing of the spirit, speedily and soon, and let us say: Amen.”ⁱⁱⁱ (*Eil na*)

Why is the *Mi shebeirach* so precious to us? Whenever I skip over it —whether by accident or design—you promptly remind me. What do we pray? “God, let your spirit rest upon all who are ill and comfort them.” *Eil na, Please God*, comfort us. In Tractate Nedarim of the Talmud, there is a lengthy discussion of illness and prayer. We learn: “A person who visits the sick should not stand above the bed or higher than the person who is ill, because Shekhinah, the Divine Presence, hovers over the head of the ill.”^{iv} From this theological statement, as is common in rabbinic teaching, we learn a meaningful practice about how to fulfill the *mitzvah* of visiting the sick – we do not stand above them, but seek to meet them at eye-level, physically and symbolically meeting them right where they are. But how is God’s presence – Shekhinah – found “at the head of the bed”? Surely we must understand that we are God’s partners, and our caring and our presence can be a vehicle for Shekhinah to be present; we are, after all, God’s messengers. God is present when we are present to bear witness.

But not only this. Because there are many dark hours, whether alone in the hospital or waiting for the surgery to begin and, for many of you, I know, you are at home living with pain or fear or loneliness – and there isn’t anyone who is with you at that moment or whom you can call in the middle of the night; our *Mi shebeirach* prayer is also our wish for Shekhinah, Comforting Presence to be with you in those hours.

In his Rosh Hashanah morning *d’rash*, Steve Kurzman talked about his life-changing motorcycle accident and recalled how he asked: “Why me?... The more I thought about it, the idea of an omnipotent micro-manager just didn’t make sense to me....I eventually grew to believe that God had had little to do with my accident. The world does not revolve around me, nor does God. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.” (If you missed Steve’s talk or want to read the all the *d’rashot* from our Rosh Hashanah services, you can find them on our website.)

My brother, *alav ha-shalom*, died of complications of ALS at age 56 last March. A year or two ago – after discussing the wonderful scene from the Sopranos, where Chris asks: “You ever think what a coincidence it is that Lou Gehrig died of Lou Gehrig’s disease?” – we chatted about the origins of his illness. I told him how I do believe that we know precisely how he got this horrible disease; some millions of years ago, there was a solar flare which sent a burst of radiation which created a mutation in the proto-DNA of our ancestors on the evolutionary tree. Perhaps. Because ultimately our illnesses along with our health are in God’s hands; for God created for us, and we are blessed to live in, a world that is orderly, a world that follows the rules of science – and we do not rely on a miracle. Shekhinah can only hover, because God does not intervene in the workings of our cells and we ultimately need and want the laws of chemistry and physics and microbiology to remain consistent and predictable; otherwise, not only would disease be random but so would any opportunities for cure or medical advancement – we do not wish to rely on miracles.



We too easily make an error of scale, believing that everything that happens is about us. But so much of what unfolds within us is on the nano-scale of atoms and molecules, and chemical bonds know no judgments; or, we are the particular expression in this moment of incremental evolutionary forces—*ma'asei v'reishit*—millions of years in the making. What is unfolding in our bodies and in our lives is not because of God's disapproval or judgment about our individual lives.

Thus we pray for what we can ask for and what it is possible to receive: "Help us as we seek ways of healing, share Your kindness with us as we increase the bonds of love and caring, and grant courage to the sick and the well together." May we be present to God's presence.

We pray our *Mi shebeirach* prayer, more than anything else, to be heard. One of my Confirmation students said to me: "It's only in shul, during the Silent Prayer, with all the other people doing the same thing, where I am able to pray. It's just so good to be listened to and heard and know that I am not alone." Prayer is about yearning; we yearn for comfort, we yearn to speak our truth, we yearn to be heard. As an adult Beth El member wrote me recently: "I enjoy praying with you so much, I forget I don't believe..."

True prayer always moves towards the transcendent Source—what I call God—and towards the soul within. Since we can only speak truth to God, God-talk and truth-talk are the same; it is the authentic speech and the opening of relationship with our higher power, however understood. Prayer begins with true speech and is realized in deep listening; we yearn to be heard but too easily shut off our own most honest and vulnerable voice. And we are heard. This is at the core of my and our Jewish faith: the Holy One is *Shome'a tefilah*, the One who listens to prayer. We learn this in the opening lines of the Torah:

הִיָּתָה תְּהוֹמוֹת הַיָּם – *there was disorder and disruption*—

וַחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹמוֹת – *and darkness in front of the deep abyss*—

וַיִּרְוַח אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֵם – *and the Presence of God was hovering*—with us, next to us, accompanying us wherever we go, for as the Midrash teaches, when we cry, God sheds tears too.^v Prayer is the naming, the yearning and the response to our loneliness and fear. (*Eil na*)

Our *Mi sheberech* is also a summons to action. "Rabbi Shisha son of R. Idi said: 'One should not visit the sick during the first three hours of the day – and instead pray' – because that's when the hospital is busiest or the person is just getting organized for the day. 'Nor should one visit during the last three hours of the day – and instead pray – for by the end of the day the person is worn out and weakest.'"^{vi}

But in between, there's plenty of hours left to transform our prayer into action. Yet too often and too easily when we reach out to someone who is ill, or to their family members, we end up asking them to take care of us instead of the other way around. "Let me tell you ... about my family's experiences with cancer...About how uncomfortable hospitals make me... About what *my* loved is going through right now..."

Often these conversations mask our reluctance or inability to be present with the person and the circumstances in front of us. That's why we need prayer. In our prayer, we can name and can offer up our own unspeakable fears, our anxiety and our concerns. Speaking our



deepest truths honestly and openly, even if silently, we can deepen our capacity to engage with and be present to the needs and reality of the people who need us, and make our interactions with them more responsive to their needs and less about our own. So in our *Mi shebeirach* prayer, we pray for ourselves – for our own capacity to give, for strength to enter into situations and relationships with people who are difficult for us.

When we prepare or deliver a meal, provide a ride or accompany someone to an appointment, our hands and our feet become our prayers. Our Congregational Mitzvah Corps reaches out to you and to me in times of need; I am asking you now if to commit to providing a meal or even just shopping and delivering for someone in our community in the coming year? Many of you have already signed up—thank you—but we need more volunteers, and we need more people to take the next step and respond when the need arises. I trust I can count on you. Let's turn our prayer into action. These cards – at the membership table – will tell you how to sign up or how to ask for help; all us are capable of being in both roles. Please take one and sign up.

We spoke at Rosh Hashanah about cultivating the *middot*, the qualities and character of the soul. A core middah is the quality of *rachamim*, compassion. Our *Mi shebeirach* summons and deepens our compassion, our open-hearted caring. When we practice *rachamim*, soul-compassion, we set aside the disappointments and betrayals, the poor decisions and harsh judgment, and practice acceptance. It's from this place of *rachamim*, compassion, that we can enter and offer the *Mi shebeirach*.

On this night of openings and truth-telling, let's practice *rachamim* towards ourselves and offer a prayer of healing for the pain and illness, whether of body or soul or mind, within ourselves. (Pause) We turn our thoughts and prayers to those we know, our family members and loved ones whose stories and whose lives are bound up with our own – let's offer them a *Mi shebeirach*, a prayer for healing. (Pause) Now I ask you to open your heart and extend your compassion further—if you are thinking of someone in the hospital or in a home, can you we offer our compassion and our prayer on behalf of the person in the next bed, whose name and story we don't know; the people we pass by in the hallway, the waiting room or perhaps on the street—we see them but we don't truly know them, yet can we include them in our *Mi shebeirach*?

On this night of openness and reaching out, can we extend our compassion-practice yet broader, reaching out and encompassing people from places where we have never been and whose lives are so different from our own; for, I assure you, their pain, their brokenness, their illness is not so foreign to us. Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia desperately need medical supplies, isolation wards and medical providers in large numbers; they also need leadership, courage, wisdom and confidence that the highest human values will shape their own and the worlds' response. Can we hold them in our prayer and how might then our prayer in turn impact us.

A couple of years ago, one of our b'nei mitzvah students, Issy Steckel, visited another synagogue and she excitedly came back with a new custom. In this other synagogue, she said, when ever anyone says a name for the *Mi shebeirach*, they always conclude with "and" – so



that the name that I speak is linked to the name that you say, and thus we hold each other and together we hold all who are in need. We've done this fitfully here...let's make it our practice too.

On this night of solidarity, can we extend and deepen our compassion, sharing our caring and reach to the land and people of Israel; we extend our compassion and our prayers for healing to our own family members and loved ones who have been so deeply traumatized; AND let us extend our compassionate prayer to those who we don't know and whom we have never met; AND may we find compassion and offer our healing prayers to all who are created in God's image, to all who are grieving, to all who are in need of comfort, be they in Israel and Palestine and Gaza along with refugees and all those who are displaced and troubled throughout the world.

My healing prayer begins with myself. From my own fragile and fragmented place, I seek strength to transform my fear to faith, I ask for the courage—as we spoke on Rosh Hashanah evening— to take this life and this self which I have at this moment and to use it for blessing.

Me'ien ha-rachamim, Source of mercy, spread your shelter of peace over all the ill among us and over all who love them, along with all who are ill. Help us as we seek ways of healing, share Your kindness with us as we increase the bonds of love and caring, and grant courage and hope to the sick and the well together.

Reveal your compassion and your blessing upon all who are ill and comfort them.

May we see together a day of complete healing, healing of body, healing of mind, healing of spirit, speedily and soon, and let us say: Amen.

ⁱ Gen. 27:38.

ⁱⁱ B. Talmud Shabbat 32a.

ⁱⁱⁱ Siddur Sha'ar Zahav (2009) has language of "May they and we know a time of complete healing..." but the text above is how I remember it.

^{iv} TB Nedarim 40a. *Rabin said in Rab's name: Whence do we know that the Almighty sustains the sick? From the verse, The Lord will strengthen him upon their sickbed (Psalm 41:3 [some translations, vs. 4.*

הַיְהוָה יִסְעָדָנוּ עַל-עַרְשֵׁן דָּוִד יְכַלֵּם שְׂפָתוֹ הַפֶּה כִּתְּ בְחַלְיוֹ:

Rabin also said in Rab's name: Whence do we know that the Divine Presence rests above an invalid's bed? From the verse, The Lord doth set himself upon the their sickbed (see Rashi on this verse) It was taught likewise: He who visits the sick must not sit upon the bed, or on a stool or a chair, but must [reverently] robe himself and sit upon the ground, because the Divine Presence rests above an invalid's bed, as it is written, The Lord doth set himself upon the bed of languishing.

^v TB Berakhot 59a.

^{vi} TB Nedarim 40a.