

## **Prayer during Times of Adversity- Delivered at National Day of Prayer**

**Annual Breakfast, May 5, 2007, Homestead Air Force Base**

I have been asked this morning to talk to you about how prayer has helped the Jewish people during times of adversity. Unfortunately Jews have had troubles. I am reminded of the rabbi who turns to God and says, "Not that I'm complaining. It's nice to be called the chosen people, but really. Can't you choose someone else for a while?" Indeed, the Jewish people throughout history have had their share of hardships- forced exiles, discrimination, pogroms, and in the last century genocide. And yet, we have been ultimately able to overcome these challenges, and even reestablish a homeland. How has prayer helped us?

When Sergeant Chaplain Ayers asked me about the role prayer played for Jews during times of adversity, the question seemed so large. How can I speak about the role prayer played in the life of a Jew during the first Crusade in 1099, when entire communities were massacred? How can I imagine what the Spanish Jew felt or experienced when in 1492 he was given a number of months to leave the Iberian Peninsula or be forcibly converted. Finally, what did the Jew stepping on the train to Auschwitz say to God? *Did they feel strengthened by prayer, or feel sometimes abandoned? Did they feel they were talking to God or talking to a wall?* Ultimately, the response of each individual is ultimately unique and personal. For some, this was a test of their faith, and I am sure that some turned their eyes to the heaven with faith that God would be gracious, and whatever the

outcome, ultimately they would be redeemed. Others in times of adversity saw a world that no longer made sense. They might have uttered, "There is no judge and there is no justice."

Thus, we to talk about prayer, we must look at the communal norms. That is to say, how did the Jews as a community respond in prayer to tragedy? I would like to explore a fascinating case study. In this complex ceremony, Jews were commanded to awaken to the needs of others, clarify their own internal and national life, and challenged to respond. The values which underscore this complex ceremony I think continue to inform Jews to this day, even if we no longer engage in this specific ritual.

What I would like to do for the next few moments is take you back to the beginning of the Common Era in the land of Judea. In only a few years, Jesus would be born. Judea was an economy based almost completely upon agriculture. Famine was a reality of ancient life; during these times a very real possibility of starvation existed. (Unfortunately, in many places in our world, famine and starvation is still a fact of life.) A crop failure was not a crisis for one or two individuals, but a societal existential threat, no different than war or pandemics, which have transformed or even destroyed societies. In the land of Israel, there is a rainy and dry season. From May to October, there is little or no rain. Basically the forecast is hot and dry- not much fun for weatherman. Then beginning in late October the rains come, immediately following planting which takes place in the fall. At the very beginning of this period, Jews went to the

Temple and engaged in pouring water libations on the altar, asking God to provide both them and the world with rain. In the daily prayer of the synagogues, Jews were asked to pray for rain. However, what would one do if the rains did not come? According to the Mishna, a collection of Jewish law compiled in the second century, the Jewish government took action, and called the community together for prayer. This was not a time to reflect, but to act! In the beginning, they would ask certain pious individuals to fast and pray. However, if this was not efficacious, the Jewish court imposed a series of days of fasts and prayer. These fast days continued to increase in their severity if the rains did not come. If by early winter the rains had not come, the court took drastic measures.

If God still did not respond to their prayers and fasts, the court would impose seven fast days upon the community, every Monday and Thursday for over two weeks. They would last for 24 hours, and it was prohibited to engage in work, washing, putting on perfumes, wearing shoes, engaging in sexual relations. They would also close the Roman baths and the stores. Finally they would blow the shofar. (BLOW SHOFAR) During these periods, they would engage in extensive prayer, including the reading of the 130<sup>th</sup> Psalm. The psalm set the mood. "I call out to you God from the depths. God hearken unto my voice, listen to my supplication. They would conclude with the prayer. "He who answered Jonah from the belly of the fish shall answer your cries on this day. Blessed are you God, who answers us in times of sorrow and adversity" They were no different than Jonah in the depths of the fish.

Why did they do this? Well clearly, they believed prayer could be efficacious. If not, why so many fasts, so many rituals? The key to prayer is the belief that someone is listening.

In fact, the rabbis tell us of one man named Choni the circlemaker. On one occasion rain did not fall. What did he do? He made a circle on the ground and sat in the middle. He says to God "I will not move from this circle until you have mercy on your children." It begins to drizzle. "No, I do not want this. I want real rain- God, the kind that fills up the wells!" It begins to rain so hard that it begins to flood- a scourge we only know too well. Choni counters to God- "No- not like that, but rain in the appropriate rate and time." And of course, God listens.

One would think that everyone was happy with him, but the head of the Jewish court, Shimon ben Shetach, sends a letter to him. He tells him "If it was not you, I would have excommunicated, but what can I do. You are like a spoiled child, and God does whatever you want. "

Why was Shimon ben Shetach so upset? Didn't Choni solve the problem? Would it have been better for the rains not to come? I think the key is to understand that Shimon ben Shetach felt the implications of Choni's actions were dangerous. *Choni turned the act of prayer into a magical act. Choni created a direct correlation between his acts and God's reaction.* However, during most of history we do not have a Choni the circlemaker, and the expectation that prayer will be efficacious in the way we want can be unrealistic. What happens the next

time when the prayer of another remains unanswered. Will people through their hands up in despair?

A visitor came to Israel and saw the Western Wall. Not being too versed in religious aspects, he inquired of another tourist about the significance of the wall. The other tourist explained, "This is a sacred wall. If you pray to it, God may hear you." The visitor walked close to the wall and started to pray. "Dear Lord," he said, "bring sunshine and warmth to this beautiful land." A commanding voice answered, "I will, my son." The visitor said, "Bring prosperity to this land." "I will, my son." "Let Jews and Arabs live together in peace, dear Lord." The voice answered, "You're talking to a wall." Prayers often seem to fall on deaf ears. How often do we feel that we are praying to a wall? Is there someone behind that wall? There are times that we feel like the beloved in the Song of Songs, where the lover "stands behind the wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice." However, there are times when the wall is impenetrable, and we cannot see or hear anything. In our world, the relationship of cause and effect are rarely seen, and so I believe that *while at the basis* they believed prayer was effective, there were other considerations when the rabbis established these complex prayers. I also think there is a much more profound implication to why Shimon ben Shetach was so upset with Choni the Circlemaker. There is far more to prayer than turning to God for help.

Maimonides was a great rabbi who lived in Spain in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. He wrote a code of Jewish law, and one section deals with the laws of fasting. He states

communal crisis are times for introspection. What has gone wrong- what have we done wrong which bring us to this point? Prayer and fasting are part of an inner process of reevaluation. Through prayer and fasting the community is awoken from their slumber, and engage in self improvement and self-renewal. In other words, PRAYER IS A PREPARATION TO ETHICAL PURIFICATION.

Think about it. Many people- people that are evil in actions and intent pray. Many people pray for the wrong things. Many people pray to get a 'spiritual high'. In traditional Jewish thought this is all irrelevant. Prayer without moral growth is irrelevant. Prayer needs to transform the heart. I

At first glance, Maimonides seems to suggest that adversity is a punishment for certain sins. However, I think Maimonides' thought is a little more nuanced than this. He states "If one does not cry out or blow the shofar, but rather says that this is the way of the world, and this tragedy that has befallen us is happenstance- this is the way of cruelty, and causes others to continue in their evil ways. Only more suffering will come of it."

Why does Maimonides call this 'the way of cruelty' Why is someone's supposition that a tragedy is natural a 'cruel reaction'. I might think heretical, irreligious, but cruel?

The real question for us is not about the ways that God works, but how are we to react. Adversity and challenge can be the basis for great moral and ethical growth. However, we need to look into it for meaning. These tragedies should

be understood as opportunities to learn and grow as individuals and communities.

In national times of adversity, Maimonides is stating that we need to take a step back and ask, "How did we get here?" "How do I understand the situation I am in?" "How am I supposed to respond?" The assumption that these things have no meaning is to deny ourselves of an opportunity for moral growth, individually and communally.

This is reason for blowing the shofar. Its sound makes a double meaning. It represents the wake-up call from God. We spend most of our life in slumber- we fail to realize the impact our actions really have. The Shofar is a call to our souls- Wake up.

However, it also represents the inner voice of each person. At its very core, for it reflects a primal scream to God. Crying reflects the idea that we are truly in need, even if we cannot yet articulate what those needs are. Without this feeling, we will never be able to engage in a process of growth. Ideally through prayer, we begin to articulate our needs. We begin to identify what we need to do to respond somehow to the reality at hand.

In this way of looking at things, prayer is very different. Prayer is not only a request that God solve a problem. It is a call to God, to ask God to help us identify the issues in our lives- individually and communal, and to help us formulate a response. In prayer we begin to realize, that what seems like an isolated event has reasons and meaning, and demands a response from us. While we may not know the exact cause-effect relationship why, we do know that

events do not happen in a vacuum, and we know that we need to respond. Thus this process of prayer is a prelude to moral introspection and change.

This is why to say that something that happens is random is called cruelty. To simply say this event is haphazard is to deny this event of any meaning. The event simply is, and does not require a religious or ethical response. When we say this, we cannot grow individually or collectively. Choni's prayer was helpful in the short term, but damaging on the long term. It took the onus off the people, and prevented them from engaging in the work of introspection. Choni allowed the people to abdicate their responsibility to God, and their moral responsibility to each other.

There is a second reason why we must respond during times of national crisis. Many times when we pray we pray for our own needs, but the highest level of prayer is to pray for others. In praying for others we express the care and concern for a fellow human being. We are stating something about our moral core. I care for you. I am concerned for you. I cannot be happy if you are not. I think about you. While we know we cannot solve the world's problems, that does not absolve us to play our part.

This concern of the heart builds the bonds that tie us together as a nation and a community. Think about the ways in which typical Americans responded to those suffering in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. People chose to take vacations not to Club Med, but to New Orleans, to play a role in reconstruction.



The faith community has been central to this process, because those who pray for others, naturally want to assist others in need. **The prayer leads to action.**

In conclusion, how has prayer helped Jews face adversity? Prayer not only gave us hope, but tied us together. It reinforced our feeling that in spite of suffering, we were not alone. Not only God was with us, but our fellow man. It is in this spirit that I would like to pray for all of you, because more than any other American, all of you represent the response of those who feel compelled to serve others. You are truly our brothers, our sisters, our parents, and we know that the blessing we have daily would not exist if not for the sacrifices you make every day.

May God strengthen you and give you the fortitude to face the challenges you have been called to do. May God protect you from all evil and harm. May God strengthen not only each of you, but your families, to be there for you during your times of need. May our leaders be given the wisdom and understanding to make the correct decisions.

Finally, when times are difficult, may God remind you of this prayer, so that each of you may know that you are in the hearts of each of us daily. We care about you, we pray for your safety, and we pray for the day when each human being will turn towards the other in brotherhood and love, and there will be no need for warfare. Make God bring peace to you and all God's creatures. May his will be done this day.

God bless America, but most of all may God bless each of you.