

Shanah tovah.
I have a question.
Why do we pray?
I think it's important to ask because over these next ten days we are going to spend an enormous amount of time doing exactly that.
We will pray for life.
For forgiveness.
For compassion.
We will ask God to remember us.
To inscribe us.
So before we begin all of that:
Why do we pray?
When I was sixteen years old, I thought I knew.
I grew up in the Orthodox community of Northwest London, in a world where prayer mattered deeply.
And when I say it mattered, I mean we believed prayer actually did something.
On the High Holy Days, the synagogue was filled with people shuckling — rocking backward and forwards as they prayed.
Some quietly.
Some intensely.
People beating their chests.
People crying.
You prayed because prayer made a difference.
You prayed because God was listening.
You prayed because what happened in that synagogue somehow had something to do with what would happen in the year ahead.
I remember being sixteen years old and leading services on Yom Kippur.
Just before Neilah, a friend of mine — a year older than I was — turned to me.
He was emotional.
We were approaching those final moments of Yom Kippur.
The gates were closing.
The Book of Life was being sealed.
And he said to me:
“This is what counts.”
I knew exactly what he meant.
These prayers counted.
The intensity, the passion, the belief — somehow they would affect the year ahead.
And more than forty years later, I still think about those words.
“This is what counts.”
I still think he was right.
I'm just no longer sure he was right for the reason I thought he was.
Tomorrow, when we say those words:
Who shall live and who shall die.
Do we really believe that somewhere, somehow, God is deciding who in this room will live through the coming year?
Do we believe that if we pray hard enough, we can influence the decision?

Does the person who prays more fervently get another year?
Does the person who gives more tzedakah get the better diagnosis?
Did the parent whose child came home safely pray more effectively than the parent whose child did not?

I can't believe that.

So again I ask:

Why do we pray? Why do we pray so much on the cusp of a new year?

One answer that I have come to believe is that prayer helps to prepare us.

We cannot prepare the year for ourselves.

But perhaps these prayers can prepare us for the year.

We have absolutely no idea what this year is going to bring.

And perhaps no date reminds us of that more powerfully than this one.

September 11.

Twenty-five years ago today, millions of people woke up and began an entirely ordinary Tuesday.

They got dressed.

They made coffee.

They kissed someone goodbye.

They went to work.

And they had absolutely no idea what was coming.

None of us did.

And that is what every new year confronts us with.

Tonight, we stand at the edge of twelve months we cannot see.

And that can be scary. Not because catastrophe awaits us, God forbid.

But because life awaits us.

And life is unpredictable.

There may be pain we cannot imagine tonight.

There may also be joy we cannot imagine tonight.

That is the frightening thing about a new year.

And it is also the beautiful thing about it.

So perhaps prayer is a kind of rehearsal for reality.

A way of preparing ourselves for what the year ahead may hold.

We rehearse gratitude.

Humility.

Forgiveness.

Letting go.

Confronting mortality.

Why?

Because eventually life will ask us to do every one of those things for real.

We practice gratitude before we need gratitude.

Humility before our pride is tested.

We practice saying "I'm sorry" because we are going to need to say those words this year.

Forgiveness because we are going to need to forgive others this year.

We practice confronting mortality because that too is something each of us eventually will need to confront.

Prayer is rehearsal for reality.

We come here year after year and say many of the same words because life will ask us many of the same questions — just in forms we don't yet recognize.

I don't know what you are going to need this year.

I don't know what I am going to need.

Maybe courage.

Maybe patience.

Maybe the strength to let go.

Maybe the strength to hold on.

Maybe the ability to forgive.

We don't know.

So we begin preparing tonight.

Because we cannot prepare the year for ourselves.

But perhaps these prayers can prepare us for the year.

Do I believe our prayers can change what happens?

I don't know. Perhaps. There are times I do believe that.

I still pray for someone who is sick. I still pray when I'm frightened. I still ask God to protect the people I love. I don't intend to stop.

There are mysteries in the relationship between human beings and God that I will never understand.

But when I think back to the synagogue of my youth, all those years ago, surrounded by people praying with an intensity that told me something enormously important was happening.

And my seventeen-year-old friend turning to me before Neilah and saying:

"This is what counts."

All these decades later, I think he was right.

Because we will leave this synagogue tonight not knowing what tomorrow will bring.

Not knowing what next month will bring.

Not knowing what 5787 will bring.

But perhaps if these prayers do their work, we will leave a little more grateful.

A little more forgiving.

A little more courageous.

A little more willing to say "I'm sorry."

A little more conscious of the extraordinary gift of an ordinary day.

Our prayers cannot prepare the year for us.

But they can prepare us for the year.

And perhaps—

that is what counts.

Shanah tovah.