

Toldot 5783
Calling Out to God From Maybes
Rabbi Betsy Forester

Above our Aron Kodesh are inscribed the words “Eilecha Adonai Ekra,” from Psalm 30. The words mean “To You, Lord, I will call out.” The words were chosen by my predecessor in this pulpit. I do not know how he related to those words when he chose them, but I admit to you that I find them very challenging.

At the beginning of today’s *parashah*, Isaac and Rebecca plead to God and speak to God; they pray, and God answers, by word and deed. How I wish I could believe and trust, when I call out to God with all my heart, which I often do, that God is right there, listening, and ready to act on my behalf. As we get older and become more aware of life on earth and our own traumatic history among the nations, it becomes more and more difficult for some of us to believe that that is what happens.

We are living in difficult times—confusing, polarizing, and often frightening and foreboding no matter what your politics are. Many of us come here on Shabbat hoping to experience joy, gratitude, and uplift. I certainly look to Shabbat for those kinds of feelings. This Thanksgiving weekend, for me, brings into focus how profound a task it is to stand before God, holding on the one hand rupture and suffering—all that is not right in our world and in our lives—together with the incredible gifts of being alive, able to give and receive love, to care and be cared for, to behold a vast blue sky by day and star-filled night and to feel gratitude to be part of the unfolding of being, with its infinite connections and synergies; to occupy one small bit of the great reality that is life, and which some also call God.

I believe in *that* God—the God of experience, of relationship and movement, sacred intention, the Source of goodness and hope—more a pervasive Presence than a Heavenly Father, more Wellspring than King, more knowing than watching, more loving than protecting, more impulse than fixer, more water than Rock. But it can be challenging to call out to that sort of God. For me, it takes a lot of spiritual, cognitive, and linguistic gymnastics to use our liturgies and scriptural readings to talk to that sort of God. And, like any other idea about what God is, it is exceedingly rare to receive a clear

response. And that can sometimes leave one wondering uncomfortably if we accomplished anything at all.

I cannot imagine I am the only person here who struggles to call out to God from this sanctuary without feeling limited by the words and facts and distractions that get in the way. And I am equally sure that I am not the only person who comes here to pray with a mix of joy and sorrow, gratitude and despair, hope and fear. Grown-up prayer, and faith, and God-consciousness can be so complicated, however much we might like to think they would come to us naturally and easily—and I know that for some of the lucky ones among us, they do. For me it takes work, yet I continue to make prayer a helpful practice in my life.

Many years ago a friend of mine named Mary Otts said something in a Rosh HaShanah sermon that helped shape my relationship to prayer. This is what she said: "Prayer is what happens when we walk around the world without callouses while we still hope for comfort. Prayer is the expression of the friction that happens when we are able to hold the pain and the loss and the misery of this world while simultaneously holding onto the beauty and the ecstasy and the hope. When we allow all of our suffering to collide with the tastes of a joyful meal, the hope of a first kiss, the warm words of a good friend, the Divine beauty of a piece of music that winds its way into our bones and burrows itself into our souls. When we wrestle with the dark and the light in an attempt to create a picture that reflects our full, and sometimes messy, realities."

She goes on: "There is profound goodness in the world—you needn't look much further than this room to feel that—and there is a profound aching. You want to know why it's difficult for me to pray? Because it means feeling so very much. All of the hurt...all of the love...without being subsumed into the binaries of either of those feelings. Without escaping into the thoughts in my head..."

So how do we do that?

I can only speak for myself and tell you how I do that—and so I shall. I do that by showing up without too many expectations. I start with these premises—what I call my "hopeful maybes": Maybe God is here. Maybe I am part of a great goodness. Maybe the Source of All flows through me. Maybe my words and deeds matter so much that they might make a difference and

if so, I am here to seek the source of my intentions, if I can open my being enough to hope that my best intentions and purest hopes might have their place among the will and drive of the Source of All.

I know that sounds like a lot, so I'll say it shorter: I show up. I don't expect the words in any book to give perfect expression to my thoughts or beliefs because I know that they do not. But they do connect me to a way of being in the world that was designed for thriving—for civilization, for our world, for communities like ours, and for me, personally. And they offer visions of goodness that restore my hope in the human spirit and in my own spirit's ability to forge a path of justice and compassion in this world. Prayer may or may not change the world. It may or may not move God. But it does change us and it does move us when we let it.

The next longer version of how it works for me is that more often than not, I show up to be with you—to share in the hope that what goes on beneath the surface connects us and matters cosmically, and that each of us might raise that deeper consciousness up to be held in it and moved by it better because we're doing it together. We'll stay longer at it when we have so many pages to turn together. We'll open more to what we need to hear internally when we sing together. We come here to give ourselves and each other permission to call out from our hearts—from where it hurts and where it bursts with joy—because it helps us when we do. In the oft-quoted words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, The primary purpose [of prayer] is to praise, to sing, to chant. Because the essence of prayer is a song, and man cannot live without a song. Prayer may not save us. But prayer may make us worthy of being saved.”

Life, and we, are always like Rebecca of today's parashah, holding both Jacob and Esau within her. We cannot be responsible, flourishing people without striving for balance between the dualities and dichotomies of life. The prayer practice of the Jewish people, grounded as it is in texts that change but little over time, offers us stable ground in which to commune and let our souls feel their way around a bit more freely so that we can feel our way around a bit more earnestly.

Did you know that in this week's conflict-fraught parashah—one of the most fraught in the entire Torah, the word “bless” appears no fewer than 32 times? That is a lot, more than in any other parashah. Maybe, we, like our Biblical ancestors, can find a way to be with our pain and struggle, and nonetheless feel how we are blessed, and how we are capable of sharing

with others the burdens and blessings that form our lives. Maybe we can nurture the practice of opening to the hopeful maybe's by capturing the awe that catches us unaware and the joy that we are blessed to experience. Putting those uplifting experiences into words is an act of prayer that shapes our attunement to the Divine and builds our capacity for compassion. Our sense of blessing becomes a source of openness and receptivity that lets us loosen our grasp on false notions of security and helps us call out genuinely, with a strengthened faith in goodness and the saving power of compassion and love.

By choosing to hold the tension of real life, to mine what is beautiful and nurturing and give care and attention to what is ugly and difficult, perhaps we will see more clearly where our help is needed and act more decisively to support one another in our struggles and to do our part to repair what is broken in our world.

"Eilecha Adonai Ekra"--"To You, Lord, I will call out" – the epigraph we encounter each time we enter this sanctuary invites us into a practice. The practice has its accouterments—books, tallit, symbols and furniture in a formal prayer space and roles for different people when we pray together. But prayer is not those things. Prayer is what happens when we open our hearts to an encounter that is different for every person and different every time. Each of us calls out to summon the Divine Presence into an attuned relationship.

I cannot imagine that such a practice would not or should not challenge us, and God. I see it as good and necessary that we, and God, be challenged when we call out to one another. May we show up and call out from this place for good and for blessing.

Shabbat shalom.