



Erev Rosh Hashonah 5768 (2007)
Sermon

Sacred Longing & Holy Desire

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Sacred Longing

Dear Holy One of Blessing, sometimes it's a husband's part
To speak about, the lady of his heart;
The girl he courted, the one who said
She'll boast about, the man she's wed.

Let never come, a moment in her life
When she'll regret, that she became my wife;
May her true eyes be just a trifle blind
To my defects, my faults of every kind.

Help me - a husband - accomplish all I can
To prove myself in all her ideal man;
If I'm not always what I ought to be,
Grant, that she may never, lose her faith in me.

And may she make allowance now and then
Since we are only grown-up boys, we men;
Loving our children, may she ever see
In them a remnant of the boy in me.

Since years must bring their load of care,
Together may we ever, burden share;
Bless us, Lord, and the children we beget,
And let us face each other—without regret.

A young man authored this poem many years ago. He recently passed away ,and at his funeral, his widowed wife and childhood sweetheart asked that this poem be read.

For me, a 47 year old man, with an extraordinary wife and two precious children, I am touched by the sweetness and longing of this poem. I am inspired by this husband's awareness of shortcomings, and his longing to be loved despite them. I love his worry: will I be worthy of my wife's love? I am moved by this man's courage to translate his longings into a poem, into a prayer.

I believe that this man's longing is the longing of every human being. Each of us possesses a heart-felt prayer for love in our lives. In my opinion, the desire to be loved is the most powerful longing of the human soul.



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But cultivating this love is so difficult. So many of our relationships are lost to doubt and mistrust. Unlike the love of this poem, the tenderness and soulfulness of love, so often disappears.

For many of us, we face no crisis at this moment, no major problems, and yet, we feel moments of emptiness and loneliness. Sometimes we hear a voice asking: What's the point? Is this it? Is there nothing more?

As Jews, this is the season in which we are called to answers the questions: Why am I here? What is my purpose? What is the unique message my life is meant to deliver? For this husband, this dad and this rabbi, our capacity and desire to share love must be central to our answers.

On Rosh Hashonah, what we desire, the nature of our longing is a subject most worthy of our reflection. This is the time to reflect on what it is that we want. Tonight we will think together about our longings and about the love that we desire.

Jewish Longing & The Motzi

As Jews we've been thinking about longings and love for several millenia. We have a special way of expressing them. We offer a blessing. Like when we're hungry: [Challah in right hand; Olive in left hand.]

We are about to eat a piece of bread and so we offer a blessing. Baruch Ata Adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam haMotzi lechem min ha aretz. "Blessed are you, Adonai, Sovereign of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the land." This generally means . . . 'Thank you God for the food I'm about to eat. Thank you for satisfying my hunger.' This is the motzi, probably our most well-known prayer.

But I want to explain, why I held an olive in one hand and challah in the other. You see, we recite the motzi even if all we're going to eat is one piece of challah the size of an olive. Honest, that's what the halachah, Jewish law, says. If all we are eating is an olive-sized piece of bread, we are called to recite the blessing.



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But we all know that an olive-sized piece of challah is never going to satisfy anyone's hunger. Thus, it is logical to conclude that our motzi is NOT about satisfying a hungry tummy. It is about something else.

Yes, the motzi is meant to create gratitude. And as Rabbi Greenstein says, 'there's nothing more critical than an attitude of gratitude.' I love that piece of Torah. But, I submit, the motzi is not about the great meal before us, but about the great desire after. The real aim of the motzi, is the sacred human longing that survives our meal.

Our culture teaches us the opposite: to dread any sense of longing. We shouldn't long for anything. Since everything is available, take all possible measures to extinguish any drop of longing. That is the voice of our culture.

But spiritual and religious wisdom knows better. Our motzi does not_ thank God for feeling satisfied, but for the sacred desire to go beyond our satisfaction. The blessing we recite before our big meals, does not thank God for filling our bellies with food, but for filling our souls with sacred longing and holy desire.

And if I haven't convinced you, follow me to the Rambam, Maimonides, one of our greatest thinkers who lived 1000 years ago. Here are 8 words he wrote in his famous legal code. "One should never eat until he is full." We should always stop eating before we are full. The challah we eat and whatever might follow should never totally fill our bellies.

And don't think this is a secret insight of the Jews. Liz Gilbert, in her NY Times best-selling book entitled, *Eat, Pray, Love*, shares the wisdom of her Indian Guru, who says: "Eat in moderation and without desperate gulps, so that we will not extinguish the sacred fires of our bodies . . ."

The Indian Guru and the Rambam are teaching us something profound and something we all know. Eating until we are full means we're never satisfied. That hunger continues to grow, day after day, year after year. We all know that gaining a pound or two every year for 20-30 years is a dangerous thing to do.

In a world with kitchen pantries overflowing, we would be wise to take



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Maimonides and the Indian Guru to heart. So, "Meir, stop before you are full," or "Meir, you're not full, now's the time to stop!" These are becoming my quiet dieting mantras.

We should be clear however, neither Maimonides nor the Indian Guru were writing a text on weight-loss. Leaving room in our bellies, they suggest, is about the quality of our character and the health of our souls. We must cultivate, not extinguish, the sacred fires of the body.

"The wise one eats for his soul," teaches Proverbs 13:25. This is a central message of the motzi we offer, before eating an olive-sized piece of bread. The motzi invites us to fill our souls with sacred desire, rather than our bellies or our homes, with stuff we desire. We must take great care not to extinguish the fires of our bodies.

Our Sacred Fires

Each of us possesses so many sacred fires. 16 years ago, at 31 years old, I became a scuba-diver. For those who have never been: Imagine being at Yosemite National Park and looking up, up, up, seeing 1000 year old trees swaying in the wind.

That's what it's like diving in the kelp forests off the coast of California. Go 30 or 100 feet down and look up. You see kelp plants, with long beautiful leaves, 1000's of them, swaying to the rhythm of the tide. Back and forth, back and forth.

Or, descend 50 or 70 feet into Australia's Great Barrier Reef, and witness the most dazzling colors in the universe, the most majestic creatures on the planet. Sharks and eels, brilliant orange and white clown fish, sea anemone so bright with color, Disney's Nemo, never looked so good.

These sights were as spectacular as anything I've ever seen. There were moments I just hung there, suspended in the water, filled with awe and amazement. For the first time, a glimpse of God turned my eyes downward to the Reef, rather than upward to the skies.

Scuba diving evoked in me an intense connection to the glory and miracle of the



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natural world; to the awesome size and power of the sea; to its magnificent color and majestic, unmistakable beauty.

In truth, however, there was more. The vastness of the sea made me feel less relevant, less significant. It unlocked a tinge of sadness, a dose of fear and an inner loneliness. But ironically, at the same time, it did something else. It made me feel more alive and more ambitious than ever before. I longed for something much greater, more vast than I; for something that would live on long after me. It made me wonder: Is there more? Do I have a purpose, maybe even a unique gift?

I think that most of us know these feelings. For some, its when we look up at the moon and stars and sense the vastness of the universe. For others, we feel it listening to a favorite piece of music or appreciating a classic piece of art.

Dr. Francis Collins writes in his book *The Language of God*, that even he feels this mystery and this longing, after heading up the team that laid out the Human Genome Map, one of the most dramatic scientific discoveries in the history of mankind.

I’ve shared a few of these transformative moments with our High School students: giving pizza to a hungry and homeless person in NYC, or, in learning that the Passover business of cleaning our kitchens, is really about the business of cleaning and refining our inner lives.

Abraham Joshua Heschel gave these moments and these longings a name. He called it: “radical amazement.” Radical amazement is the capacity for awe. The ability to be stopped in our tracks by a sight, a sound, or an idea. Radical amazement is the capacity to appreciate so much that we take for granted.

So what’s the Motzi, our prayer about sacred desire got to do with scuba diving, or radical amazement? Everything!

The Pacific Ocean is no more awesome than the rain that falls from our never-ending sky. The kelp fields are no more beautiful than our own fields of wheat or corn or barley. The enormous variety of fish in the sea is no more spectacular than the vast array of faces in our world.



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Don't leave these WOW moments for once-a-year vacations. Every time we eat an olive-sized crumb, we're invited, encouraged to journey to the Great Barrier Reef. Our motzi seeks to transport us every day to mountaintops and oceans fronts. The motzi is an invitation to enter our longings, to experience moments of awe, to stand in wonder at the miracle of God's natural universe.

Baruch Ata adonai – Jewish Name for Longing

I have a request: There are a few in this room, I'm guessing, who are thinking something like: “Well Meir, Rabbi Meir, you can do this because your faith in God, is so powerful.”

Trust me when I tell you that we are all the same when it comes to the motzi. I say the motzi because I sense that the universe is a grand mystery, and I long to approach that mystery. I say “Blessed are You, dear God,” because I long to explore our awe-inspiring world. I say the motzi because both the coral reef and the fields of wheat are spectacular. Trust me, we are all the same, when it comes to the Motzi.

Its been said that we are the only living beings who ponder what is beyond; who question the meaning of life; who reflect on the purpose of our existence. No other creature longs for a purpose, or craves what is beyond his natural instincts. Other animals surely love, but we're the only creature with the desire to reflect on our love. No other being seeks to answer the question: Why am I here?

We are a unique species and our High Holy Day mission, I submit, is to fulfill our lofty human potential, to search for and discover the unique message of our lives. On no, Rabbi Meir has nothing on you, when it comes to the motzi. Every one of us has touched the grand mystery of life. Each of us has experienced our own awe-inspiring moments. Every one in this room has asked or will ask themselves the most profound human questions.

And so now you know the secret. Rabbi Meir, and I suspect the other clergy on this bima as well, have no special insight into the meaning of the words “Baruch Ata Adonai,” Blessed are you Adonai. No one really knows what these words



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mean. None of us is certain about the who, what, when, why or how of our God.

But certain we should all be about one thing. There is nothing more real, than our uniquely human longings. They are present every moment of every day of our lives. No one can deny that we possess them. They need no proof.

Baruch atah Adonai, Blessed are You, Adonai, our God . . . This the Jewish way of expressing our longings. This is the Jewish name for holy desire. The name for Jewish sacred longing is: Baruch Ata Adonai, Blessed are You Adonai.

Just as our human longings are everywhere, so too is God everywhere. Just as our longings cannot be seen, so too is God unseeable. Just as our longings have unlimited power, so too is God all-powerful. Just as our most heart-felt longings are filled with love, so to is God filled with love.

Rabbi David Wolpe writes that: “A love unspoken is a love not fully felt.”

Likewise, in order to feel our longings fully, we must translate them into language. And so, over and over again we offer, Baruch Ata Adonai. The secret is now yours. We offer the motzi, and we speak of God, because we cherish opportunities to express our longings.

Motzi & Partnership

I want to think with you, about one final aspect of our longing, and yes, it of course bears on the motzi. If you have a plate full of fruits and vegetables and say, a chicken breast, and a piece of bread, the motzi is the only blessing you recite, although there are separate blessings for the chicken, the fruits from the trees, and the vegetables from the ground etc.

The motzi is the blessing we recite for one reason. Unlike the fruits we can eat directly off of the tree, or the vegetables out of the ground, its just not so with the bread we eat. The wheat we harvest is not yet bread. The bread we eat requires enormous effort: from planting and cultivating the wheat, to fertilizing the soil, abundant rain, harvesting the crop, etc.

So, when facing a plate full of food, we recite the motzi because it points to a life



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of partnership; partnership between God and humans. This is the Jewish understanding of God—that God seeks a life and a world of partnership. And partnership, its highest manner of expression, is the subject with which I want to close.

I was once at a wedding where the couple chose an extraordinary statement for their wedding theme. The bride and the groom each wrote a prayer, and shared it with everyone present.

Each of them integrated the statement: “Beiti zo isht,” which means, “My beloved is my home.” A dear friend of the wedding couple even composed a song on that theme, which she sang under the chuppah.

I’ve thought about this theme for a long time: “You, my beloved, are my home.” First, I think this statement means that wherever you are, that’s my home, and, as long as I am with you, I am home. Two beautiful expressions of love.

But I think “You are my home” means something even more pointed and more challenging. What it means, I think, is that your fears and your weaknesses are my home. The qualities in you that even you wish did not exist, those qualities are my home.

So often, we want to ignore, deny, beat into oblivion the qualities of our others that are most challenging. But, “You are my home” teaches us otherwise. “My home” must be my desire to live in your set of challenges; “My home” must be my longing to give what you need, rather than, what I want to give. Giving what is hardest for me to give, but most important and most helpful for you to receive – that is “our loftiest home.”

I hope its clear now that the motzi begins with partnership between God and human, and ends with the partnerships we build together. It ends with a partnership that fulfills our uniquely human potential; the longing to know, understand and to give with love what the others in our lives need most.

As we travel this High Holy Day journey, may we know that our sacred longing is uniquely human, and it points out for us our ultimate purpose. It pushes us to go



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beyond ourselves; motivates us to feed hungry people, inspires us to master a new art and revel in a beautiful melody. It excites us to become immersed in new and beautiful ideas.

WOW is the word; WOW is the single ingredient necessary for a spiritually rich and meaningful life. The longings we feel are the roots of our noble achievements and the seeds of our holy pleasures. We must make opportunities, to be awed by nature; and take opportunities to be stopped in our tracks by a sight, a sound, or an idea.

May we allow the words Baruch Ata Adonai, the Jewish name for longing, be an expression of our own personal longing. May every motzi be an invitation to WOW, a dazzling journey into nature's glory; and our mysterious longing for what is beyond.

May every motzi remind us of our profound faith that we are here for a purpose, and of our most sacred human purpose, to be loving and gentle partners.

May 5768 be a healthy and a happy year and a year of many precious longings, Kein yehi ratzon, may it be God's will.