



***“Praying to God in the Way I Know Best”***

**Rabbi Meir and Tara Feldman’s Sermon  
On Rosh Hashanah 2010/5771  
Temple Beth El Great Neck, NY**

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### I. Yussel and a Reed Pipe

Many years ago in a small town just outside Warsaw, lived a certain Reb Shmuel, known far and wide for his learning. But few people knew about Yussel, the orphan boy who lived in Reb Meir’s dairy barn and who led his cows out to pasture and back. Day after day Yussel played a simple reed pipe, as he led his cows past sparkling streams and through the tall grass. Yussel, who rose at dawn and returned to the dairy barn with the setting of the sun, was a simple orphan boy who felt the beauty of the shimmering world around him.

One year Rosh Hashanah came and when Yussel saw the men walking to the synagogue he pulled at Reb Shmuel’s long black coat. “Can I come today?” he asked. “No,” the teacher said, with a gentle smile. “Dear boy, the cows do not know it is the New Year. You must take them to pasture as you do every day.”

“And,” added Reb Meir’s son with a sneer: “You can’t even read a word of Hebrew. What would you do at the synagogue?”

And so the men continued on their way to shul and Yussel headed out to the pasture. Back in the synagogue, the morning passed slowly, as the men mumbled and prayed on and on. Yet, even as their mouths spoke the words of Hebrew, their minds wandered to the meal awaiting them at home, to their business affairs, to... well to anything but the Hebrew words on the page, words they had memorized long ago.

But there was one moment that everyone, waited for with joy. And that was, of course, the moment that the Rebbe would raise his shofar to his lips and welcome in the new year, with those mighty shofar blasts.

But it seemed that moment would never arrive. On and on went the mumbling, the praying. And the men in the synagogue began to look at one another, “Had the great Rebbe forgotten?”

But no, he had not forgotten. You see, before his eyes, Reb Shmuel had witnessed a vision. He could see that the gates of heaven were closed, locked... And the Rebbe would offer no shofar blast until those gates were on the verge of opening. Only then would the Holy One be willing to hear... .

But no one else had seen this vision. And no one would dare question the great Rebbe. So they just kept on uttering the words in their prayer books. Also no one had seen the shepherd boy, who had crept silently into the back of the synagogue. Yussel had taken the cows quickly that day, so that he could sit and pray with the great scholars of the town.



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The prayers dragged on. And finally the rabbi began to weep and to shake his fists toward the sky, “Riboino shel Olam!”, “Master of the Universe,” he cried. “Open heavens’ gates so that our prayers will be accepted. Open the gates wide!”

Suddenly a new sound drifted up into the air from the very back of the synagogue. A melody from a simple reed pipe, pure and sweet. It was Yussel, with his rough hands and his tattered clothes. It was Yussel, a little boy who didn’t know an aleph from a bet, who had never opened a prayer book. All at once, the men of the synagogue leapt from their seats and snatched the pipe from Yussel’s lips.

But Reb Shmuel motioned for them to return the pipe to the boy, so that he could continue to play.

His tune, his prayer, drifted up and up and up, until it seemed to hover over the roof of that shabby little synagogue, rising up high and higher until it pierced through the sky.

And Reb Meir knew it was so... He knew that heavens’ gates had opened at last. Then Yussel put down his pipe. The Rebbe raised the shofar to his lips, and inscribed everyone gathered together in that little synagogue, in the Book of Life for a good and sweet new year.

## II. This Story Is Us

We start with this story because this story is about us. Like Yussel, our shepherd boy, many of us are unfamiliar with the aleph bet. Like Yussel our shepherd boy, whether in English or not, our prayers often feel foreign, or forced or even artificial.

We begin with story, because like Yussel’s father, we parents are easily embarrassed by what we and our children do not know. We start with this story because just like Yussel’s father, we parents assume that our children’s special passions either bear no connection to, or compete with, their Jewish lives.

We begin with this story, because like Yussel’s father, many of us have lost our faith in our own prayers, and, in the unique prayers of our children. We face enormous challenges, outside these walls. Faltering careers, terrifying illnesses and teetering marriages threaten our personal lives. The economy, environment, health care, terrorism and more, threaten the very fabric of our society, including our most basic hope that the future will be better than the past.

Like the wise men of Yussel’s shul, we’re sophisticated, we’re highly educated. We know better than to believe that a boy’s hand-made, reed pipe can have an impact on our community’s greatest problems.



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We begin with this story for one final reason. It expresses the prayer that we all share. No matter our politics, our spirituality, or our faith, each of us shares this prayer on this day. Whether or not we have children of our own, whether or not our children are grown or still at home, we share, at least, this prayer.

We pray that our children and grandchildren will possess the courage to step forward and have the determination to lead our community to a place of wholeness and peace. We pray that as with Yussel, Rosh Hashanah will inspire in our children a renewed sense of pride and self-worth. We pray that our children and grandchildren will possess the spark of confidence, that unlocks their capacity for greatness.

Whether we have children or not, whether our children are grown or not, we want our children to cultivate a deep and nourishing relationship with God, to feel in their very being the mystery and wonder of the universe and to trust that their prayers can unleash the greatest of life’s possibilities.

If there is any prayer that we share today, this is it. And if we knew how to make this a prayer a reality, we would make the investment, no matter what the cost or effort.

### III. The Jewish Responsibility We Owe to Our Children

“On Rosh Hashanah every Jew passes before God to be judged.” On this day, says the Mishnah, 1800 years ago, each of us sits before the Holy One of Blessing. Today is Yom HaDin ---- The Day of Judgment. Judgment is the foundation of Rosh Hashanah. Our liturgy, our prayers, repeatedly remind us of this message.

On this day for at least 20 centuries, Jews have asked the same questions: By what standard does God judge me? What claim does the Holy One make upon my being? Regardless of my belief in God, what does this Jewish life require of me? What does it mean to me, to be a Jew? What claim, if any, does community have upon me? “Rabbi, I haven’t committed any horrible deeds this year. I try to be caring and sensitive. I work hard to take care of my family and fulfill my obligations. I send my kids to good schools.

Or at least, I’m trying. I make sure that my kids or grandkids get a bar mitzvah. Is my basic obligation greater than all of that?”

Friends, we ask the question, is my basic obligation greater than all of that? Let me begin by expressing it this way: Harvard-for-the-spirit; Yale-for-the-soul. That is our Jewish responsibility. That is the Jewish obligation we owe to our children.



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Our children must feel, within their very being, the power to speak to God. We must instill in them a deeply felt yearning, a rich and specific path to joy and to meaning and to community. We must cultivate a love that will nourish their souls, an attachment that will draw them closer to the miracle of life.

Our task is to raise children bursting with humble pride. A Jewish pride that is nurtured by daily encounters with inspiring Jewish wisdom and penetrating Jewish knowledge; by daily acts of chesed, Jewish kindness; and by genuine, daily feelings, of the relevance and beauty of a Jewish life.

We rabbis work with lots of people wishing to convert, to become Jews. The desire, the yearning, the admiration they feel toward Judaism is extraordinary. They want to be Jewish. They want what comes to most of us by birth. In the spiritual autobiography that one convert wrote, he described the completion of his conversion like this: “I feel as if I’m entering the most elite club in the universe.”

This is the Jewish obligation that rests upon us adults: to convey to our children that to be a Jew is a glorious and life-enhancing privilege, an opportunity, a sacred calling, a gift that will give more and longer than all the other gifts we give to them.

#### IV. Jewish History and Jewish Children

Possibly before any other people on earth, Jews recognized the significance of providing our children with a spiritual education. I want us, together, to visit five Jewish homes throughout our history, so that we will understand our ancient and profound commitment to the spiritual well-being of our children.

Our Talmud records that as far back as 1800 years ago in Palestine, the land of Israel, we instituted a system of mandatory education. I quote from the Talmud: “Remember for good, the man Joshua ben Gamla . . . For Ben Gamla instituted that teachers be appointed in every province and every city, and children from the age of six or seven were placed under their charge.” (*Baba Batra 21a*).

And 900 years ago, we hear of this from our most famous thinker, Moses Maimonides, the Rambam, who spent most of his life in Cairo. “If a city has made no provision for the education of the young, its inhabitants are placed under a ban, until teachers have been engaged. If they persistently neglect this duty, the city is excommunicated, for the world only survives by the merit of the breath of schoolchildren.” (*Maimonides, Hilkhos Talmud Torah 2:1*)

Eight hundred years ago, in France, a Christian scholar noted: “A Jew, however poor . . . will put his children to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God’s law, and not only his sons but his daughters too.”



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Six hundred years ago, even at the height of the Inquisition in Spain, Jews instituted a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. 160 years ago in Frankfurt, Germany, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch insisted that the community create a school before anything else.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, makes a remarkable observation. Education in England was not compulsory until the 1870’s, nearly 2000 years after the Jewish establishment of mandatory education. Rabbi Sacks writes: “It is hard to think of any other religion or civilization that is as child-centered as Judaism, nor any that has predicated its very existence on putting their education first.”

#### V. Secular Passions

I want us to think again about Yussel, our shepherd boy. There is something else I want to return to in this story. The shepherd boy’s little reed pipe, the instrument that carried his prayers to the gates of heaven, was not distinctively Jewish. This story suggests that every child has a prayer that can break open the gates of heaven. But the instrument that carries this prayer may not be distinctly Jewish.

A great Zionist writer, named Achad Ha’am, wrote an essay about 100 years ago, with much to say about our children’s secular interests, about their love, for example, of music or sports or technology. In his essay, entitled *Imitation and Assimilation*, Achad Ha’am explains how Jews have survived so many generations in the Diaspora, how we have preserved our uniqueness and identity, even as a tiny minority. In this essay, Achad Ha’am distinguishes between two crucial ideas: between imitation and assimilation. He shows how a people can productively imitate but not destructively assimilate. An imitation that raises us up need not be an assimilation that deprives us of our uniqueness and our eternal mission.

I quote: “This will explain why the Jewish people has persisted in exile, and has not become lost in the nations, in spite of its inveterate tendency to Imitation. As early as our Prophets, our ancestors learned to despise physical strength, and to honor only the power of the spirit. . . It was only [into] a great spiritual force in the life of a foreign people, that [the Jews] could [invest] their individuality . . . The Jews have not merely a tendency to Imitation, but a genius for it. Whatever they imitate, they imitate well. Before long they succeed in appropriating for themselves the foreign spiritual force in which they have [invested].” (*Imitation and Assimilation*, p. 118.)

I submit that Achad Ha’am is offering a powerful insight. Hidden in the cultural forces that have captured our children’s imagination, is a profound spiritual power. In other words, concealed in the toys, in the stuff that our children love the most – is the power to transform our community.



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As we pass before God on this day, we must hear the question clearly: What is the Jewish obligation we owe to our children? How do we help our children discover the prayer that they love most? How can our children’s love of music or nature, deepen their connection to God and to Jewish community? How can our children’s love for sports or technology carry our community’s prayers to the gates of heaven?

Many of you know a book and now a YouTube video entitled, *The Last Lecture*, by *Randy Pausch*. Randy Pausch was the brilliant professor from Carnegie Mellon who died of cancer at 48 years old and who filmed his last lecture. In this lecture, he spoke about childhood dreams, about wanting to play football in the NFL.

In this lecture, he explained what we all know about our kids’ sports endeavors. We don’t encourage our kids to play sports so that they will become professional athletes. Rather, we encourage them to play sports so they’ll learn self-confidence, courage, cooperation and teamwork; so they will experience the joy of a community striving to achieve greatness.

Our children’s commitment to sports is a powerful part of their spiritual development. It was in my childhood. Basketball was my life as a youth. To this vertically challenged 10 and 13- year-old boy, there was little more important than hoops. My experiences on the basketball court, and the many trophies on my shelf, had a profound impact on my life.

If we hear Achad Ha’am and Randy Pausch correctly, soccer, baseball and basketball radiate spiritual power, not just physical power. If we listen carefully to them both, ESPN is a vessel of love, not just for the teams we love, but for a hidden spiritual force waiting to be released into the world. Likewise, our kids’ sports teams are a container not only for their athleticism, but for a profound spirituality: for a commitment to something larger than the self, for a confidence in their ability to make a critical contribution; and for the choice to take responsibility for others, to say to others: “You can rely on me.”

If we listen closely to Achad Ha’am, it’s obvious that there is a spiritual force as well, in our children’s attachment to technology. Facebook, YouTube and Twitter -- they possess a spiritual power. Within the iPhone and Blackberry is an energy that can inspire the souls of our children, that can help our children’s prayers break open heavens’ gates, and deliver a divine message.

But, we must ask: what is this message? One of our great 20<sup>th</sup> century teachers, philosopher and activist Abraham Joshua Heschel, described for us the message, the purpose of Jewish education. “What young people need today is not religious tranquilizers, religion as diversion, or entertainment, but spiritual audacity . . . I would like to suggest as a goal of Jewish education . . . that every Jew be aware that Judaism is an answer to the ultimate problems of human existence. . . .”



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Not audacity, but, spiritual audacity, that’s what our young people need; the belief, the stubborn certainty, that Judaism is an answer to the ultimate problems of human existence.

If we listen to Randy Pausch, to Achad Ha’Am and to Rabbi Heschel, we will learn that the iPhone and Blackberry, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, must not be our kids’ favorite tranquilizers, diversions and entertainment; but rather, the forces that inspire them to spiritual audacity.

I remind us of our primary question: What is our Jewish responsibility to our children? As we stand before God on this day of Judgment, what Jewish claim is upon me, and upon us?

Our shepherd boy showed us the answer. The answer begins with what our children love. We first must help them discover a genuine love, a heart-felt longing for the mystery of life. We then must help them unlock the hidden, spiritual power that resides within the activities that they love most.

Unleashing spiritual power, is our responsibility. This is the obligation that we owe to our children.

#### VI. Only by Way of Community

I want to step back for a moment. Our community, our world faces so many problems. Speaking to almost two thousand of you on Rosh Hashanah, it feels risky, a bit scary, to focus on the questions: What does God require of me? Does this day, does my Jewish community have any claim upon me? What is the Jewish obligation that we have to our children?

Some of you no doubt feel, “Rabbi, of course these are appropriate question to ask! Today is the Jewish New Year. What question could be more relevant!” But others are likely thinking, “How can you let a holiday pass without saying anything about hunger, homelessness, health care, poverty, the environment, terrorism, anti-Semitism, Israel, peace?”

I’m quite sensitive to this critique. These are the critical issues. These are the questions that carry ultimate significance. And that is precisely why I pose our question: “Based on what standard will God judge each of us and all of us? What obligation rests upon me as a Jew, and upon us as a Jewish community?”

I am sure about one thing. The more deeply we care about our gravest challenges, the more must we face these questions: What is my Jewish mission? What is the Jewish obligation we have to our children? What is our collective Jewish responsibility? We must face these questions as a community. For community is the only genuine engine



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for change. Constituted by caring, devoted, loving, educated, inspired souls, community is the only real force for transformation. Without an inspired community, our talk about these issues, is, well, it’s just talk, likely to go nowhere.

#### VII. May 1963, Becoming the Children of Birmingham

I want to remind you of a piece of history. This moment in history connects several of our themes: community, prayer, our youth and their reed pipes, the instruments they love the most.

This moment in history is a moment of spiritual audacity. When a community of young people finds their instrument, their reed pipe, when they come together for a sacred purpose, God seems to listen.

The history I am about to share is a far cry from Great Neck, 2010. The historic moment was May 1963. The setting is Birmingham, Alabama. The actors – the African-American community – suffering from a violence and hate unimaginable to our children, here and now.

My sincere hope is that this distant moment in history will shape our future and our present; that we so internalize this historical moment – that we become more like our shepherd boy and less like his father.

In 1963, Martin Luther King and the civil rights leaders decided on a plan in Birmingham, Alabama, that would secure equal rights for African-Americans. Dr. King and the others believed that this plan would break the back of legalized discrimination, of institutionalized racism. Their plan was to walk cross a well-known Birmingham intersection, from a black neighborhood to a white one, ignoring a law that said they couldn’t, and ensuring their arrest and imprisonment. Their plan was for black men and women to fill the jails of Birmingham. Dr. King expected that countless adults would volunteer to participate in this plan, that black men and women would step forward in droves, to accept the risk and the privilege, of being sent to jail.

Delivering a famous speech at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, King explained the plan and asked for volunteers. “Who will join me, as we march ourselves into the Birmingham jails?” Silence. Not a single man or woman answered King’s call. No one stood. A thundering silence reigned.

But something unexpected did happen. A child stood from his seat. One child stood up and volunteered to march himself into prison. And then another child stood. And another and another and so on.



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In May 1963, ignoring the instructions of their parents, thousands of boys and girls skipped class and risked failing marks in school. Inspired by the captains of Birmingham’s high school sports teams, thousands of African-American youth, expressed their deepest, their most heart-felt prayer. With pride and dignity, they faced the attacks of vicious police dogs, and the spray from fire hoses powerful enough to knock an adult off his feet. With pride and dignity, thousands of African-American youth marched themselves into police vans, and into prison.

Imagine the scene: It was a jail yard, jam-packed, with the stars of the high school sports teams, and with little children as young as four years old, unable yet, to utter the word “freedom.” The boys and girls were placed in adjacent cells. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder on hard floors. For some, jail was home for up to two weeks.

When it rained, they got soaked. No baths, no showers. Little food. Barbed wire surrounded them all. The girls sang to the boys in the adjacent cell. The boys sang back to the girls. Filling the jail cells with song, these young people fulfilled Dr. King’s wish – to transform a prison of hell, into a place of hope.

Speaking to terrified parents, King said: “Don’t worry about your children. They are going to be all right. Don’t hold them back if they want to go to jail. They are doing a job for all of America and for all of mankind.”

“They are doing a job for all of America and for all of mankind,” said Dr. King. And a month later, on June 11, 1963, horrified by the images of peaceful children attacked by dogs and knocked off their feet by fire hoses, President Kennedy gave a stirring speech before the American people. In his speech, he declared his commitment to end legalized discrimination and racism. This speech initiated the drive for the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

This moment in history demonstrates the power for goodness that our children can unleash. Thousands of reed pipes coming together in Birmingham were a catalyst for change in the course of human history. The songs and prayers of Birmingham children had the spiritual power to break open heaven’s gates.

Rosh Hashanah, our Day of Judgment, is a day to ask: How can our Beth-El youth do a job for all of America, for all of mankind? Our kids, who achieve so much, who do so much, who have so much, must have one more thing. We must ensure that our children carry in their backpacks, what Heschel prescribes – spiritual audacity.

“I felt like a giant at 15.” That’s the way one of the Birmingham kids describes herself when she entered the prison in 1963. We must inspire our children to feel like spiritual giants. They need the opportunity to generate change. They need the responsibility to unleash the spiritual power existing within the toys they love so deeply.



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**VIII. Doing a Job for All of America, All of Mankind**

Our shepherd boy is right. A child with one skill, with one love, one passion, can cause the prayers of a community to be heard by God. How can our Jewish youth do a job for all of America, for all of humankind?

**IX. A Vision for the Future**

What if between now and Yom Kippur, 613 of us ask this question? What if 613 of us have this conversation, with our families, friends, colleagues? What if, between now and Yom Kippur, you report back with your ideas? What if we set a goal for ourselves of 613 tweets, or text messages or e-mails, sharing ideas about how our children can become the children of Birmingham?

For those who don’t know why I keep using the number 613, I beg you to Google, “613 and Judaism”. It’s a number that every Jew should know.

In the meantime, your rabbis have a vision we want to share with you: Close your eyes and open your hearts. Imagine this: it’s Yom Kippur 5772, and four times in the past year, on Sukkot, Passover, Shavuot, and on Rosh Hashanah, 3,000 Jewish youth (the number of children who went to jail in Birmingham) produced a message of peace for Muslim children around the world.

It’s Yom Kippur 5772, and 12,000 Jewish youth have produced pieces of art, music and writing, in their synagogues. Twelve thousand youth have expressed in Jewish metaphors, their visions for peace between Jews and Muslims. It’s Yom Kippur, 5772, and 12,000 children have produced YouTube videos, expressing in their own unique way, what being Jewish means to them and what they believe it should mean to the world.

Imagine something further: it’s Yom Kippur, 5772, and Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, Fox and CNN have received 12,000 YouTube videos from our children. It’s Yom Kippur and Muslim youth in Tehran, in Gaza City, in Bethlehem, in Riyadh, and all around America, are learning from our youth what it means to be Jewish.

Thousands of our youth have tried to share with the Muslim world something small and personal about being Jewish, about peace and Jewish prayer, about peace and Jewish holidays, peace and Shabbat, peace and feeding hungry people.

**X. The Benefits of Failure**

Oh, of course this is laughably idealistic. It is completely unrealistic. Naïve is a generous understatement. But we know also, that Yussel’s father and the wise men of his shul were certain that Yussel’s prayers would be meaningless to the well-being of their community.



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We know as well, that not a single adult responded to Dr. King’s call at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church. Not one adult had the courage to stand up and to join Dr. King in Birmingham.

J. K. Rowling, author of the Harry Potter series, said in a speech to the graduates of Harvard University: “On this wonderful day when we are gathered together to celebrate . . . I have decided to talk to you about: the benefits of failure.” Samuel Becket, winner of Nobel Prize for literature, wrote in his play, *Waiting for Godot*: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.”

Imagine again, it’s Yom Kippur, 5773. That’s two years from now. There’s even more to this vision. Something truly dazzling has happened this past year. Because of the efforts of our Jewish youth, there now are churches all over this country creating their own youth campaigns.

The tiny Jewish community might produce 12,000 messages a year, 12,000 messages for Muslim youth. But the Christian community can produce 120,000 messages a year.

The airways of Al Jazeera, Fox, CNN, Al Arabiya are now filled with messages of peace from Jewish and Christian children, and from Muslim children as well. Look at the pride that our Jewish youth feel. Feel what they feel. The sense of purpose and meaning and significance in our children’s eyes is palpable.

Their Jewish tradition, their Jewish identity, their Jewish community has inspired a youth movement that expresses what almost every human being wishes to express.

Imagine a “Million Youth March.” Imagine a million youth believing so deeply in praying to God the way they know best, that they prepare uniquely personal, and uniquely Jewish, Christian and Muslim messages of peace.

Imagine the music that a million reed pipes could produce. In fact, if we collected those little pipes, they might remind us of the gorgeous organ pipes just above our eyes. Our children’s pipes can produce a sound, a penetrating and transcendent sound that can travel outward to the corners of the world, and upward to the gates heaven. Our job, our responsibility, is to enable them to ascend to such heights.

May 5771 be a year of responsibility, a year in which we celebrate our Jewish gift, and our Jewish responsibility.

May this year be the beginning of a new search for the music, the reed pipes of our children.



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May it not be a year of selfish audacity, but a year of spiritual audacity.

May we search ever more carefully for the hidden spiritual power, in the sports and technology that we and our children love.

May we be inspired by the Children of Birmingham.

May we learn from them about the power of our children and the power of our children’s prayers.

Shana Tova – May 5771 be a healthy and fulfilling year.