In this past Sunday's New York Times magazine, there appeared an article entitled "Is There a Right Way to Pray?" It's author – an admitted agnostic and non-prayer- visited a variety of religious institutions- a 3,500 seat 'prayer palace' in Brooklyn, a prominent Reform temple in Long Island, a small evangelical chapel in rural West Virginia – and spoke with several leading religious figures – a minister who leads 'prayer summits' to teach people to pray, a 'spiritual director who serves as a kind of religious personal trainer, a Reform rabbi who stars in the cable show "Godsquad", and an academic theologian – all in an attempt to assess the state of prayer in this country. Are most of us praying these days? In what forms do we pray? How often and what are our intended goals in prayer? Rev. Daniel Henderson, the leader of the prayer summits, argues that the quality of one's prayer is dependent on the prayers of those around you, in your prayer community - "You learn from people who are already good at it."
He even suggests that there is a formula for good prayer:

1. Let God begin the conversation
2. Keep your prayers brief and clear.
3. Repeat simple Scripture-based phrases.
4. Pray standing up to fight torpor.
5. Pray directly facing others, eye to eye, in a loud, clear voice.

All good suggestions, some of which we do here and others which we do not, but might consider- I think that the last one might be particularly interesting in our minyan.

In hearing about the author's experience at the evangelical churches, Rabbi Marc Gellman, the Reform rabbi, sighs with envy and says:

"There is no prayer harder than suburban Jewish prayer. Our people don't get emotional in public. The only time I can recall really serious praying was after 9/11. I did 30 funerals around that time. We got 2,000 people at a memorial service. That was transcendent davening. Evangelical Christians, Pentecostals, they go to church to pray. Why else would they be there? But Jews are different. People come to temple to identify with other Jews or socialize. The writer Harry Golden once asked his father, who was an atheist, why he went to services every Saturday. The old man told him, 'My friend Garfinkle goes to talk to God and I go to talk to Garfinkle.' There's a lot of that.'

The author of the article responds – "At least they come"

Gellman goes on and echoes Rev. Henderson's earlier point– "Sure, But when you have a large percentage at a religious service who aren't actually praying, it dilutes the quality of the entire experience."

The joke about Garfinkle is a funny one and probably very accurate in many synagogues across this country, but the point raised is a pressing one – what are we all doing here? Today, on Yom Kippur, above all other days, we come to shul to pray, and we hold in our hands the machzor, which supplies us with no shortage of

prayers – excerpts from Tanach, poems written by Jews at different times throughout history. We stand, we sit, we bow, we mumble silently and sing aloud. We try to connect the dots between us, as we sit here in this synagogue in Skokie, IL, and our ancestors – prophets preaching at a time of impending exile, Talmudic scholars in Israel and Italy, and liturgical poets writing in Spain and Germany.

This journalist's questions are meaningful and provocative for us, here today – beginning with the question –what is prayer? Obviously, there is no singular answer and the response reflects the individual answering and the moment in time, the moment in a person's life and the moment in the course of a Jewish year. We pray with a different tenor on Purim than we do on Pesach, a different tone on Rosh Hashanah than we do on Tisha B'Av. As I thought further about the words and sentiments of the people interviewed in the article, I could find neither clarity nor consensus. So I turned to the machzor, the tefillot we offer on YK, a day with arguably the most numerous, intense, gamut-covering tefillot, to see what they might reveal about our Jewish prayer, if nothing else.

Yom Kippur is a complex day – a day of atonement and judgment, desperate soul-searching, reflection, purification. Interestingly, YK is often mentioned both for its connection to one's wedding day and one's deathbed. With RH symbolizing the creation of the world, rebirth, a new moon, YK stands at the other end of the spectrum – a day on which we enact our death, offering the confessional, vidui, that is said before dying. Through that lens, we see YK as a time of the utmost vulnerability, a period of liminality and unknowingness, when we stand living, yet pray and act 'as if' we were on the edge of death. It is a deeply uncomfortable and unsettling feeling, and I think that it is intended to be so. In this sense, our prayer seems to be used for the purpose of ritual reenactment. And, for something else.

As I looked through the machzor, I was struck again and again by the same picture. The beautiful piyyutim that predominate in the YK davening have a rhythmic incantatory feel, with words that repeat in a certain pattern again and again and again, alternating between the baal tefillah and the kahal. The poems speak of our human lowliness and our pleas for mercy and compassion, and they often employ the aleph-bet format, recalling Rev. Henderson's suggestion that prayer needs structure and formulaic order if it is to be successful – whatever that might mean. These piyyutim, with their repetitive rhythms, seem to have a theurgic quality to them – that we are trying to utilize the words of our prayers to effect a desired outcome with God and the universe. We are praying our desired results into reality.

I then looked to the YK Torah reading for more insight. The layning today speaks of the High Priest's Temple service on YK. It details the ritual – the clothes he is to wear, the sprinkling of the blood on the various animals, the leaning on the se'ir to transfer the sins of the people of Israel on its head, the cleansing with water. The entire scene reflects a tightly organized and highly hierarchical drama, done by the High Priest, in a certain way in a particular order, on behalf of the people. When you take into account the initial setting of this service – the wilderness – an interesting

dualistic picture emerges. At this moment in time, the People are travelling through the desert, the barren wilderness, moving towards home – Israel – yet spiritually still far from it. It is a place that is heavy with a feeling of dislocation and vulnerability, a place very similar to where we each stand today, on YK. The People are wandering, without a sense of stability or security, and here comes this detailed ritual that is done before them that seeks to do what many of our piyyutim attempt – bring order and structure to the chaos. Because positions of vulnerability are frightening, chaos is brought under control and tamed through ritual, law, prayer, commandment. The wildness of life is elevated through these things – we see it everywhere in the stories of the Torah, beginning in the creation account, and we see it in all of the halachot we follow today. Order brings meaning and holiness and closeness to G-d, so goes the traditional theme. Perhaps that is what our prayer is doing today – seeking G-d and purification through structure and rhythmic order.

But I think there might be another way to look at prayer as a different sort of vehicle towards closeness with G-d, one that resonates with greater strength for me.

Before RH, I went, on Jessica Kaz-Hoffman's prompting, to a high holiday workshop by Estelle Frankel, a psychotherapist and teacher of Jewish mysticism. She presented us with many different texts speaking about the kabbalistic understanding of RH, but one particular text left me deeply affected. It was a text from the Talmud in Rosh Hashanah, one I had not encountered before, that spoke of the meaning of the sounding of the shofar, and it says:

"Abaye expounded: The disagreement regarding how to sound the teruah revolves around the following: The Biblical verse n Numbers 29 instructs 'It should be a day of sounding the teruah,' and the Aramaic translation for 'teruah' is 'yevavah.' Now regarding the mother of Sisera, the Bible remarks that when she heard of her son's death, 'the mother of Sisera stood at the window 'vateyabev.' One opinion is that the meaning is that she sighed and sighed – and therefore the teruah should sound like shevarim – a gasping sound, and one opinion is that she cried and cried and therefore the sound of the teruah should be broken – like uncontrollable sobbing tears."

The text asks a very basic question – what does a teruah sound like? How do we know what sound to try to make when blowing the shofar? I'm sure many of you are familiar with the list of reasons for blowing the shofar provided by Rabbi Saadia Gaon, ones which, honestly, have never provoked much meaning for me. This text approaches the question from an entirely new perspective by invoking the story of Sisera and his mother. Sisera was the captain of an enemy army that Israel faced in Canaan. Deborah, the prophetess, urged Barak to fight Sisera and his army, which he did and upon his army's defeat, Sisera fled and sought refuge with a man named Hever. That night, Hever's wife, Yael, took a tent stake and pounded it through Sisera's skull, killing him. This episode is often recalled as a victorious moment for

Israel and for women, as it tells of a brave and strong woman who took it upon herself to bring an end to a vicious enemy of Israel. But this Talmudic text flips this account on it's head and forces us to rethink the story from a human angle. It speaks not about Yael and her heroic deed, but about Sisera's mother – the other victim in this story. We are made to see Sisera as a human being, a son with a mother, a mother who cries a hundred cries when her son does not return home to her. And the Talmud tells us that we blow the shofar 100 times to recall, to reenact, this mother's grief. When we hear the shofar we are told to picture in our mind's eye an intimate and heartbreaking scene, a mother waiting and waiting for her son's return and collapsing uncontrollably into soul-wrenching sobs when she realizes that he is not coming back to her. The staccato notes of the shofar are her cries, her act of giving herself over to those shattering emotions, and we blow the shofar to hear her pain and stand beside her.

What is this beautiful Talmudic text really telling us? I think that it comes as a counterpoint to the liturgy's and the layning's approach to attaining closeness with God. Rather than finding holiness and spiritual elevation through structure and highly controlled order and ritual, maybe, we should not shy away from – we should seek out- that which makes us uncomfortable and frightened– maybe God is in that wildness of the wilderness? Maybe we can find God in places of vulnerability and liminality, moments when we permit ourselves to stand on the edge of losing everything, as Soloveitchik writes in "The Lonely Man of Faith:" – "…redemption is achieved when humble man makes a movement of recoil and lets himself be confronted and defeated by a Higher and Truer Being."
And in extending this Talmudic passage into the realm of interpersonal relationships, maybe we can find God, and hence touch the holiness in our humanity, when, in our prayer, we can contemplate our enemy's mother and her moment of utter anguish and imagine ourselves in her place.

At the end of the NYTimes article, the journalist travels to the small evangelical chapel in rural West Virginia and observes a fervent, impassioned and personal form of prayer – individuals desperately praying for the sick in their community – their friends, their children, their grandparents - with the utter faith that they can talk to G-d without mediation, that their prayers ascend to God and bring about healing and restoration. After all of his travels and research, the author experiences these moments as the most genuine example of true prayer. Why? Because they are not offered from a safe and distant place, said with careful reservation, using a script – the people praying stand in front of G-d and give all that they have to their prayers, every ounce of faith and trust, and in that offering, they risk rejection and loss as well.

Standing on the threshold of loss is a far more frightening place than dwelling in a neatly ordered universe, but perhaps it represents a more honest attempt at the most challenging of spiritual pursuits.

Gmar chatimah tovah.