

Erev Rosh Hashanah
5778/2017
Rabbi Robert Goldstein

*Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?
My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends.
Worked hard all my lifetime, no help from my friends,
So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes Benz?*

So crooned the late great blues singer Janis Joplin, her whiskey soaked voice deep and raspy after years of cigarettes and hard living. A kind of prayer, I guess, that never quite made it into the exalted canon of the High Holy Day liturgy. The lyrics intended to mock the materialism and avarice rejected by the anti-establishment hippie generation in the 1960s.

Tonight we begin the ten-day journey of our most intense praying. I don't mean to imply that many of you don't pray at other times of the year, but there is an intensity to these High Holy Days when we turn our attention away from the mundane and focus our intentions, if just for a moment on our spiritual lives.

I saw a wonderful Israeli film this summer. By the way, you know the difference between a "movie" and a "film?" Movies are what you see at a fancy theatre with those relaxing reclining seats and bar service. They show *films* at Kendall Square in Cambridge, and that theatre in West Newton where you have to walk up three flights of stairs and sit in an uncomfortable chair for 90 minutes, your feet glued to the sticky floor as you risk your life in what I am certain is a fire-trap.

The *film* I saw is called the "Women's Balcony." It's about a small, poor congregation in Jerusalem. On the day that was to have been the *bar mitzva* of the grandson of one of the pillars of the congregation, just as the boy was about to chant his portion, the women's balcony, where all the ladies were sitting—it is of course an orthodox *shul* where women and men sit separately—the women's balcony collapses. The rabbi's wife ends up in a coma, and while there are other injuries, mercifully, no one dies.

Back to Janis Joplin. In 1970, she died prematurely, of an unintended overdose. Outside the hotel on the night of her death sat Joplin's car: not a Mercedes, but a Porsche decorated by her friend Dave Richards whom she had paid \$500 to paint it in psychedelic colors. The hippie icon who sang, "*My friends all drive*

Porsches,” died, young, with a Porsche sitting outside her hotel. She had achieved all her dreams, sort of, her prayers were answered, sort of, but I am not sure she ever realized how fleeting the pleasures found in material things.

Back to the film. In the “The Women’s Balcony,” we discover midway through the movie that the *bar mitzvah* boy, who never did actually have a chance to chant his *baphtorah* because of the chaos after the balcony’s collapse, had a moment before the disaster been sitting in his seat, praying with all of his heart and soul, that some miracle might occur saving him from having to perform. You see, he wasn’t prepared, and only he knew it. Had he ascended the *bima* not knowing his portion, his parents would have been scandalized, his grandfather humiliated, and the rabbi outraged.

Later in the film, there is a beautiful exchange between the remorseful and guilt ridden boy and his grandmother, when he confides in her his belief, his horror that it was all his fault. He thinks it was his prayer that caused the accident that left so many people injured.

But in her wisdom, his grandmother admits, “That’s not how miracles work...I don’t pray for miracles,” she said, “God doesn’t have time for my miracles. God gave us brains of our own.” And the rest is up to us.

I am a big believer in the power of positive thinking. Imagine how depressing, how paralyzed we would be if all we did was sit around and worry all day about how bad things are, or if we are fortunate enough to have good lives, living with the constant and overwhelming fear that it might all disappear in an instant.

Positive thinking may have its place, but it does have its limits. I think it was Allan Greenspan who said the financial crash nine years ago was the result of “irrational exuberance.” We cannot will the stock market to rise, or wish away a bad medical report.

I remember how whenever my high school Spanish teacher would walk through the class room handing back the blue books exams, how I prayed for a decent grade. I think my timing might have been off...my energy would have been better spent studying harder the night *before* the test.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks talks about the difference between optimism and hope. Optimism, like positive thinking is passive...it’s doesn’t require any action. Hope on

the other hand, which is very much a Jewish virtue requires courage. The Israeli national anthem *Hatikva*, means “the hope.” It is an acknowledgement that , yes, for two thousand years Jews prayed they might one day return to the land of their ancestors, but it was not until the early Zionists, like the generation of Idan’s and Gitit’s parents, and so many others, inspired by hope had the courage and the will to settle the land and build a nation.

Our High Holy Day gathering is meant to be more than sitting around imagining what the world or our lives could possibly be. It’s about finding the courage in the words of the prayer book, or deep in our own thoughts to act, to make those real changes in our lives that will bring us nearer to the people we love, more like the people we know we can be. Prayer is not magic; or even so much about miracles, although sometimes they do occur. Prayer is about finding the will, if we have the determination, to make the next year better.

There is an assumption inherent in the High Holy Days; we can sort out our complicated lives, realign our priorities, and ultimately grow and change, and live with greater dignity, compassion and joy.

It is my hope that something you read in the prayer book in these next days, a word you may hear from the *bima*, a melody that stirs something in your heart, or most likely something you discover deep in your own soul, will move you, cause each of us to live better more meaningful lives.

We gather all of us, the regulars, the three times a year Jews, our guests, no matter what brought you here, tonight we are one congregation. I pray that we inspire each other, encourage each other as we give thanks for our blessings and resolve to endure the challenges we may face this next year with humility and hope.

Tit-chadashe Alaynu, Renew us O God, on the eve of this New Year, bring us happiness and health, contentment and joy and peace at home and abroad. And mostly, we pray: may God's loving grace find its way into our hearts and our homes...Amen