

*Pouring Out Our Hearts to God: Reimagining  
Our Relationship with Prayer  
Rabbi Claudia Kreiman  
Erev Rosh Hashanah 5784*

This summer I took Alma, my oldest daughter, to a Louis Tomilson concert at the MGM Musical Hall at Fenway. Louis is one of the former singers of One Direction. If you don't know who he is, that's ok. I didn't either. I had a parenting fail by not getting tickets to Taylor Swift, so this was a way to redeem myself.

To tell you the truth, I did not expect much from that evening. I was just chaperoning my daughter and I figured I would sit and wait, listen to some of the songs that by now I knew from our car rides, and then probably take care of some email.

I have not been to a concert in a long time... too long. And I have definitely not been in a room with so many people between the age of thirteen and twenty five, give or take.

I could spot some people like me – parents, older people – swaying side to side, pretending to know the songs while trying to take pictures of their children without them noticing. At some point, they went to the back, and after standing for three hours, sat down on the ground and played on their phones.

The thing is that my phone died. And so did my plans for being productive. So there I stood, watching and listening to five thousand people who were singing and dancing to music I didn't really know. I was fascinated by their passion, enthusiasm, and the intensity swirling around me.

I was reminded of some of my experiences as a teen, though I listened to a different kind of music. But after a few minutes, I began to relate to the experience as one of profound prayer. More accurately, I longed for our prayer experiences to be like the one that these thousands of young people were having together. I was teary looking at

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the intensity of this one-time instant community which was there for one purpose: to sing and dance to the music of this beloved (and let me add, pretty good) singer.

I longed for that intensity, not just for myself, but for us, for those of us who come to services every Shabbat, or once a year. What would it feel like for us to pour out our hearts to God — to be raw, vulnerable, and ecstatic — just like teens at a concert? It is not that we have not had experiences of soulful prayer and song, full of tears and joy. Surely, we have.

I think we can pride ourselves for being a community of joyful and soulful prayer and I am hopeful that in the next ten days, we will hold together sacred space for prayer and heart-opening experience. In some ways, the concert reminded me of *Ne'ila*. I should have worn my *Ne'ila* shoes.

But in many ways, the experience of worship is very different. I read an article<sup>1</sup> by a Christian Indian blogger, Rejoy Thadathil, who describes five key differences between a concert and prayer:

Number one: The main intent of a concert is for the singers and musicians to entertain the crowd. In prayer, the main intent of the leaders is to ensure that the congregants are tuned to worship God and not be mere listeners.

Number two: At a concert, the focus of the leader and the musicians is to sing the best they can and not mess up. While in worship, the focus is God.

Number three: At a concert, the more extravagant the stage — with sparkles and lights and acrobatics — the better. At a worship service, the fewer the distractions, the better.

Number four: The concert is about the moment. You feel great and wonderful, but it will not transform you. While the hope for a prayer service is one of transformation.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://medium.com/@rejoy\\_thadathil/five-differences-between-a-concert-and-a-worship-service-ecbaa02bd174](https://medium.com/@rejoy_thadathil/five-differences-between-a-concert-and-a-worship-service-ecbaa02bd174)

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Lastly, he noted that when attending a concert, it does not matter who you are and what you do after that. You go and leave. But in worship, it matters who you are and what happens after you leave.

Some of his analysis rings true to me. Prayer is not about being entertained, though many expect some level of entertainment at a prayer service. On the other hand, concerts can truly be transformative. In addition, coming into prayer together is about community and values, and bringing our full selves to it.

But I am left with one key question: Why (for the most part), for many of us, is it much easier to access intensity, vulnerability, and liberation at a concert or a dance party than in a sanctuary?

In speaking to Rav Tiferet about this, she shared with me her experience this summer, as she went to Baton Rouge for a concert, all by herself. As she described the experience to me, she talked about the sense of anonymity. No one knew her, no one cared about her dance moves or what she wore. She brought her full self to this far-away place and let her soul crack open to the music of her teens. (You can ask her the name of the artists she went to see, none familiar to me.) Rav Tiferet reminded me of this as a difference to notice: our whole liturgy, especially the one of the High Holidays, is one of community and belonging and not of anonymity. On Yom Kippur, we will recite our list of sins in the plural:

אֲשָׁמְנוּ. כָּגַדְנוּ. גָּזַלְנוּ. דִּבְרָנוּ לְפִי.

We are guilty, We have betrayed, We have stolen,  
We have spoken incorrectly

We are a we, we are not an I. We are a collective.

And that is not only true in prayer or in our liturgy, that is true in the ways that we think about belonging to community and to the Jewish People.

Maybe the key difference between a concert and a prayer service is the lasting experience of the collective.

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When we come together in prayer and in community, the hope, the goal, is that we are reminded of our belonging to the “we.” The “we” is a collective experience that lasts far beyond the moment of *tefillah*, of prayer... I hope. I hope it lasts in the life of the community at TBZ, in the life of the Jewish People, in all the ways we show up in the world.

Maybe that makes the experience of prayer more difficult for some? Perhaps for many of us, even though being in community is an important value and at the center of why we are here tonight, opening ourselves fully and bringing our full selves becomes challenging, exactly because we are not alone?

The Ba'al Shem Tov, the founder of Hasidism taught: “When a person is praying and is making outlandish movements, do not mock them for such a one is trying to save oneself from the waters of iniquity.”<sup>2</sup>

The Ba'al Shem Tov does two things in this teaching. First he compares the movements of our prayers as movements of salvation, of survival. And second, he recognises that a person might avoid doing so, for fear of being mocked.

Fear is alive for many of us when we come to synagogue. We fear judgment. We fear being ridiculed. We fear being different. We fear not knowing enough. We fear being lonely.

My question for all of us is how can we walk into the experience of prayer with our full selves, with an appreciation that I am who I am, and it doesn't matter. At the same time, how can we allow ourselves to be transformed as part of the collective?

For me, that is what spiritual practice is about. For me, this is why I am here, why we are here. The next ten days will not work as magic. At the end of Ne'ila, we will be the same people, but hopefully, we will enter this year with a deeper understanding and a transformative experience that will allow us to deepen our spiritual practice. Allowing ourselves to bring our full selves, to not be embarrassed, to cry, to sing, to dance, to

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<sup>2</sup> עמוד התפילה קלט

shake our bodies and our souls, but not in anonymity, not far away in Baton Rouge, or at Gillette Stadium or at a dance party, but here, in sacred space, in community. With people that will embrace us for who we are, with our strengths and our weaknesses.

This year we have chosen the words from the beautiful *piyut* (liturgical poem) ***Ya'aleh*** to be the guiding words during our High Holidays. This *piyut* is sung during the Kol Nidre service, during the *Selichot* section. The first stanza reads:

יְעֹלָה תְּחִנּוּנֵינוּ מֵעֶרֶב. וַיָּבֵא שׁוֹעֲתֵנוּ מִבֹּקֶר. וַיֵּרָאָה רְנוּנֵנוּ עַד עֶרֶב

May our supplication ascend from the evening.  
And may our cry come from the morning.  
And may our song appear till evening.

These words speak to the opening of our hearts and voices, bringing our full self to prayer, bringing our full self to life, and committing ourselves to showing up in the world, morning, afternoon, and evening. All of the time.

And how can our experiences of bringing our full selves to this space, to this community, to these ten days together, also inform the ways we show up in the world, every day, at work, at school, with our family and friends, with our neighbors and co-workers? Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable, and show our true selves, and open up to other people with vulnerability and truth.

My hope, my prayer, for us for the next ten days together is that we allow ourselves to enter this space in community and in fullness. This is a place where you can be safe and held, where you won't be mocked, where you can pray and pour your heart out: I do it from the *bimah* – and that makes it safe for you to do it from where you are. I hope we can, all of us, allow ourselves to cry out and lift up our voices individually and collectively for a world that is more just and beautiful, where humankind can fulfill its potential to be partners with the Divine in the ongoing creation and healing of this world.

*Shana Tova.*

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