

## MORNING PRAYERS

Shirah Alice Bell, Ph.D.

“Gosh, there’s nothing to eat in this house,” my daughter Livia’s voice travels down the hall through my closed bedroom door, insistent, intruding. “Figure something out! We’ve got to leave for school in 10 minutes,” her brother Nicolas says. I try to block out their voices, as well as the stabbing sensation in my stomach as I realize I didn’t leave anything out for Livia to make for breakfast. “Will I get to say my morning prayers?” Here I stand, facing toward Jerusalem as I gaze at the dark blue bedroom wall, dog-eared copies of selected prayers in hand. “What next?” I wonder, as if I haven’t done this almost every morning for the last six months.

I pick up my *tallit* and quickly drape it over my head and shoulders, murmuring the traditional Hebrew blessing. I feel like a rebel, wearing a *tallit*. When I was growing up, only men wore these ritual prayer shawls. Now women are participating in these traditions. The heavy cotton shawl feels strange but comforting. It reminds me I am stepping into the divine Presence. “God, are you offended that I am standing here in my nightgown and slippers?” I silently ask. Pushing aside these thoughts, I murmur lines from Psalm 27: “It is You that I seek.” Are you here, God? I wonder. My doubts compete with the distant sounds of the cats meowing for food and the kids arguing over who will feed them. I begin to recite the morning blessings, switching between Hebrew and English, trying to let the words reach my heart.

My prayer record had been spotty, much like other resolves such as daily sit-ups and meditation. Sometimes I prayed for

several days in a row, but then something interrupted my rhythm – an early appointment, a late night – and my resolve would disappear. Once broken, it was hard to resume. I would not pray for a few days or weeks, sometimes feeling guilty, but more often not even noticing I wasn’t praying.

That all changed last March. I was sitting in synagogue, the seat hard beneath me, waiting for the Saturday morning Sabbath service to begin. It was no ordinary service. It was being led by our daughter Livia, celebrating her 13<sup>th</sup> birthday and entrance as an adult in the Jewish community. She was now a *Bat Mitzvah*, a daughter of the commandments. I sat in the front row, fluctuating between pride and anxiety as Livia readied herself to lead the congregation in prayer. I recalled her brother Nicolas’ *Bar Mitzvah* three years before, and my own, as an adult, just a few months before his. When I was a child, girls weren’t encouraged to have a ceremony. My months of study and practice played like videotape as I sat waiting for Livia to begin. What impact was the process having on her, I wondered? She stood at the pulpit, long dark hair making the little skullcap on top of her head seemed perched for flight.

A deep longing came over me, a wrenching desire to move beyond the hustle and bustle of last minute arrangements to what this event was really about – being one with God. My body softened as I remembered the rare occasions in the past when I had connected with that unnamable Spirit. I sat at attention, ready, opening myself to the Presence that was there, somewhere. I was in touch with, not the formal prayers in the prayer book, but a wordless yearning that grew larger and warmer.

Instead of talking to God, I listened. I was quiet, hoping to hear something. “What are You telling me?” I beseeched. I listened closely. The answer draped over me, like my *tallit*. *Pray to me each day. Each time you do this, you will be with me.* It was as if God had whispered in my ear, inviting me to have a daily morning date. My eyes filled with tears, and for an exquisite moment I knew God was with me.

Sitting in the pew that special morning, people murmuring around me, I committed --to myself and to God--that I would pray in the Jewish ritual way each morning, even if only for five minutes. I would stand before God and do what is required by the Rabbis from ancient days. Since that *Bat Mitzvah* morning, I have hardly missed a day.

Nevertheless, I wonder: am I doing it right? Would I qualify if I were to be graded and compared with my Jewish friends, the Rabbi, the tradition? I’m doubtful. No, I’m sure I would fail the test.

This morning is typical. I feel tugged and pulled as I stand before God. “Do You want me to shut myself away from the kids so I can pray? Should I go out to the kitchen instead and help with breakfast?” “They’re old enough to take care of themselves,” I reason. “Or are they?” “What *do* You want me to do?” I ask.

I fall into these debates frequently. Choices, choices, always having to put aside something for something else. If only I had infinite time. Get real, Shirah, this is part of life. It is *how* you make the choice that counts. God is watching. What are you going to do? I try to settle myself, get back into the prayer, but my

thoughts keep returning to the kids in the kitchen. Sighing heavily, I kiss my *tallit* as I remove it, and apologize. “I’ll be back soon,” I promise.

Out into the morning busyness I go. Livia, two inches taller than I and not sure if she is child or grown-up, greets me with “Mom, what can I have for breakfast?” “Oh, no,” I think, “Can’t I have even a moment to adjust my mood? I guess not.” “Well . . . is there something here you would eat?” I ask doubtfully.

“I don’t know. You’re the mom,” Livia says.

Rummaging through the freezer, ever more desperate as the clock ticks by, I produce triumphantly a pre-packaged burrito, high in sodium and additives. “Here, I’ll microwave it and you can eat it on the way to school.” Inside, a little voice admonishes, “This isn’t good for her. Can’t you make something healthier?” “It’s better than going hungry,” I rationalize. I stick the burrito in the microwave, silently thanking that piece of equipment that, before we had kids, I had vowed never to use.

“I’m off” Livia yells.

“Wait for your burrito,” I call. I grab the partially warmed up burrito and race out the door to catch her. She swings her leg over her bicycle, grins at me, and grabs the food. I grin back, and watch her ride off. “Will she really eat the burrito or toss it as soon as she’s out of view?” Slowly I walk back inside, glad that at least we had connected with a grin. I wonder if God will count this, too, as prayer.

(Originally published in *Sustenance Magazine*, Vol 3.)