

**REFUAT HAGUF**  
**EREV ROSH HASHANA, 5775**  
**CONGREGATION SHIRAT HAYAM, NANTUCKET**  
**A sermon by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor**

When I was a young rabbinical student studying the traditional liturgy, one prayer always made me laugh out loud. While in the Orthodox world the prayer would be recited after one's daily ablutions, in the Reform Prayer book it would come at the very beginning of the daily morning service, known as the Shacharit service.

ברוך אתה יי אלוהינו מלך העולם, אשר יצר את האדם בחכמה, וברא בו נקבים  
נקבים, חלולים חלולים. גלוי וידוע לפני כסא כבודך, שאם יפתח אחד מהם, או  
יסתם אחד מהם, אי אפשר ליתקים ולעמוד לפניך. ברוך אתה יי, רופה כל בשר  
ומפליא לעשות.

Blessed is our Eternal God, Creator of the Universe, who has made our bodies with wisdom, combining veins, arteries, and vital organs (Traditional siddur: openings and cavities) into a finely balanced network. It is obvious and known before your Throne of Glory that if but one of them were to be ruptured (giggles) or but one of them were to be blocked it would be impossible to survive and to stand before You. Blessed are You, O God, who heals all flesh and does wondrous things.

I now stand before all of you thirty-six years after I let out my first giggle after reciting that prayer and say to you: This is one of the most profound prayers in our liturgy for it teaches us one of the essential and necessary characteristics of life – implicit in the very work of Creation and the very design of our human bodies:  
**BALANCE.**

As a 23 year old, I didn't give a thought to the first thing I did when I got out of bed in the morning. As a 58 year old male, I am grateful every time things seem to work. I am grateful that my doctor pronounces my prostate "healthy" and I have spent much time counseling those who must make decisions about what

course of treatment one should take when the prostate is not healthy. I know that it is important for my cells to reproduce, but I know well the devastation of too many cells growing out of control and threatening the balance of life. I know that my mid-section waxes and wanes depending on what I put in my mouth and how often and how much. I know that I look healthy when I have had some sun on my face and I know what it is like to suffer self-inflicted second degree burns on my body when falling asleep unprotected on the beach. The words of the Morning Prayer seem oddly reflective of life itself. Our bodies are finely balanced networks and when that balance is disturbed, little good results.

Some of you know that I have had to face difficulty with my knee since February, but allow me to recount: a young out of control skier and I collided on the slopes of Mount Tremblant, and as I fell, I heard what sounded like a gun-shot. It was the rupture of my ACL (anterior cruciate ligament). One week later, I was scheduled for routine surgery to replace my ACL using a ligament from my patella (knee-cap). While the ACL was repaired, the knee cap cracked. Suffice it to say that I have had several more surgeries attempting to repair my knee cap, (along with another surgery to repair my left wrist which was broken when I fell down the stairs after the second surgery and my crutches got crossed) and the jury is still out on the question: Did my knee-cap, and thus my knee, finally get repaired.

Every day I struggle with balance – not just the physical balance of walking with a distinct limp, and an unreliable and unstable knee, but the impact this injury has had on my life and lives of the people around me – the toll it has taken on Marianne and our children and close friends, the price paid by my co-workers as my work output is in direct proportion to the amount of pain that I can control.

And in the search for control of pain, I either have to forego the medicine and suffer, or rely on a medication that eases the pain, and numbs my cognitive skills.

For each of us to find health, we must strive to find balance and find appropriate measures to achieve that balance. Pliers cannot

remove a fine splinter and amputation is not an appropriate solution to a blown ACL. We must examine what afflicts us and find appropriate measures.

Those who have studied pastoral care remember the groundbreaking work of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who in her book On Death and Dying, taught us that those who confront death go through five stages of grief: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Acceptance I have come to believe means being about to separate one's self from the illness - to understand that the illness does not define the meaning of who and what we are. Following her work, it was soon discovered that these stages well explain the cycle of emotions that anyone goes through with almost every traumatic challenge, whether it be economic disaster, loss of a job, divorce and illness.

Perhaps most common when dealing with a major illness is the reaction, "Why me?" I certainly said that myriad times: when I was first hit by the skier, when we learned that the surgery had gone awry, when the second surgery failed to fix the problem, when I fell down the steps and shattered my wrist, and pretty much at every given opportunity to whine, the opening salvo was some form of the "Why me?" conundrum.

What a perfectly useless question, for it begins with the flawed premise that life is out of balance and the scales of justice have not tipped in one's favor. It continues with the even more flawed notion that this challenge has happened for a reason, even if that reason is unfathomable. A far better question, a question that could actually lead to an answer might be, "OK, what am I going to do about this?"

This challenge is ancient. Listen to the voice of the Psalmist, who in the 13<sup>th</sup> Psalm wrote:

*Ad ana Adonai tishkachayni* - How long, Adonai, will you totally forget me?

*Ad ana, tas'teer et-panecha mimeni* - How long, will You hide Your face from me?

*Ad ana asheet aytzot b'naf'shi yagon bilvavee yomam* – How long must I seek counsel by myself? Have grief in my heart all day long?

*Ad ana yarum oyvee alai* – How long will my enemy triumph over me?

*Habeeta ahnayni Adonai elohai* – Pay heed! Answer me, Adonai, my god!

*Ha'eerah aynai pen-eeshan hamavet* – Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.

*Pen-yomar oyvee yi'chalteev* – Lest my enemy say, “I have overcome him!”

*Tzarai yagilu ki emot* – My foes rejoice at my downfall.

*V'ani bichasdecha vatachti yagayl libi beeshu'atecha* – As for me, in Your kindness I put my trust, My heart will rejoice in Your deliverance.

*Ashira Adonai ki gamal alai* – I will sing to Adonai for the goodness God has shown me.

The Psalmist undergoes a series of stages when challenged with despair. Four times he cries out, “How long?....” In this Psalm “How long ?” is akin to asking “Why?” He then demands recognition, “Pay attention to me!” He then asks for understanding, “Give light to my eyes.” He then detaches himself from his suffering, and sees the suffering itself as the object of his downfall – he calls it “his enemy” – he uses the concept of an enemy metaphorically – He makes his suffering manifest physically so that he can separate himself from his suffering. Finally, he asks not for healing, instead he asks not to be left alone – to know that God is at his side. By divorcing himself from his suffering, he rediscovers himself and he steps back into life. (NB – I make a large leap here assuming the writer of the Psalm is male – I know).

By setting the illness apart from one's self, one can focus on the illness as a thing, and one can then focus on him or herself. But those who are ill know that the illness has become a part of you – when you separate the illness away, one needs support. Like this Psalmist, this is when faith can be most helpful. “I put my trust in God” the Psalmist says – I don't know why I have been afflicted,

but if I am to rise above my malady I need to feel that I do not do this alone. In the 16<sup>th</sup> Psalm (16:8ff) the author of the Psalm says, "I have Adonai continually before me, being at my right hand, I shall never falter. Therefore my heart rejoices and my being exults, indeed my body rests secure." (NB: all translations of the Psalms are based upon Martin Rozenberg and Bernard Zlotowitz's New Translation and Commentary on the Book of Psalms)

Balance begins when we are able to remind ourselves who we are essentially - and seek out faith and comfort and strength to fight against that illness which is the source of pain. But it is possible that pain can overtake the person - leaving one incapable of expression, with little left to do but cry, weep, or moan.

Intolerable pain unmakes the universe, says cultural critic Elaine Scarry - it expunges thought and feeling, self and world. "...all that gives rise to and is in turn made possible by language. Because of severe torment, the sufferer is unable to experience relatedness, unable to grasp surroundings, unable to speak. But, when someone reaches out and is able to reach through the pain, to the real person, Scarry writes, "is to be present when the person in pain rediscovers speech is almost to be present at the birth or rebirth of language.' (I am grateful to Rachel Adler for making me aware of Elaine Scarry's The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, which Adler cites in her festschrift to David Ellenson, "For These I Weep" CCAR Journal Fall 2014)

For healing there must be balance between inner and outer worlds - the one who is ill needs to find hope and those around that person help relieve some of the person's suffering -- one of the greatest of mitzvot is bikur cholim, visiting the sick.

The Psalmist looked outward and sought God. Scarry refers to a person who stands by the afflicted. In both cases, the sufferer is not alone.

Once when one of Rabbi Akiba's disciples fell sick, none of the sages visited him. So Rabbi Akiba himself entered his house to

visit. When it was told that the great rabbi was coming, they swept and sprinkled the ground before him, and “the student recovered. ‘My master,’ he said, ‘you have revived me!’” When Rabbi Akiba saw the effect of his visit he “went forth and lectured: ‘Whoever does not visit the sick is like a shedder of blood.’” (Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 39b-40a)

The Talmud, Brachot 5a relates that when Rabbi Chiyya bar Abba fell ill, Rabbi Yochanan went in to visit him.... ... Rabbi Yochanan said to him: “Give me your hand.” He gave him his hand and he raised him.

Raised him? Physically? Spiritually? Your guess is as good as mine. But there is no doubt that Rabbi Yochanan’s touch had a healing effect, and so does yours and and so does mine! (NB – thanks to Rabbi Arnold Gluck for reminding me of this passage).

When we take it upon ourselves to visit the sick, we are told that we carry away a portion of their suffering. We do not visit the illness – we visit the person – and this allows the person to find balance. ‘You came to visit me because of who I am, not what this illness has done to me.’ When we visit the sick, we remind them of who they are, since they stand in relation to the visitor, as a friend.

When afflicted by illness, we need to find a way to separate ourselves from that which plagues us – and to do that, we need strength and faith – and we need loved ones and friends to help us alone the way.

So when we rise, let us each take stock of the blessings of our bodies – with all the creaks and pains and reminders that we are human – and let us feel grateful that we can strive to find balance – and when things are out of whack (as they are wont to be) we turn first to the Source of Life and remind ourselves that God’s design requires that we seek balance.

By the way, the common question “How are you?” in Hebrew, is “Ma Shlomcha – of Ma Shlomaych?” How is your peace, how is

your wholeness, how is your balance? When we find balance we find peace – exactly what I wish for each and every one of us on this New Year’s Eve.

Mi shebeirach avoteinu...  
M-kor ha-bracha l’ee-mo-tay-nu  
May the source of strength  
Who blessed the ones before us,  
Help us find the courage  
To make our lives a blessing,  
And let us say, Amen.

Mi she-bay-rach ee-mo-tay-nu  
M-kor ha-bra-cha l’avo-tay-nu,  
Bless those in need of healing  
with re-fu-ah she-lay-ma  
The renewal of body,  
The renewal of spirit,  
And let us say, Amen.

Shana Tova!