

Why do we pray –

When Rabbi Brown and Cantor Becker gracefully asked us to share a few words about why do we pray, we gladly accepted thinking it would be an easy assignment. Of course, after days of writing and re-writing our thoughts, we actually founded that there is no right or even easy answer to this question. Abraham Heschel --- GOD IN SEARCH OF MAN... Certainly, to Luciana, Uma, Micah and myself praying is primarily about gratitude:

- First, for the amazing opportunity we were given to have a happy, healthy existence – one we particularly come to appreciate at times of adversity or sickness;
- Gratitude to be able choose, and in each decision - at minimum - aspire to achieve our full potential both as individuals and as members of our family and of our community
- We are also grateful – and most especially so- for the sacred gift of life. A gift we have received from our parents and were incredibly lucky to be able to precious pass along; The sole idea of creating life, and perhaps because of our own experience, is what we cherish the most. Witnessing the growth of two healthy, smart, beautiful kids on their way to become loving friends, caring individuals and conscientious citizens is both a blessing and a unique sensation of completeness and deep accomplishment. Essentially, a comforting awareness that we have already passed the torch in the most fulfilling and gratifying manner.

Indeed, Luciana and I (as many thousands of others) immigrated to our new home in a sort of living manifesto of prayer in a quest for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- for ourselves and those that surround us.

But we also pray for other, profound, fundamental motives that can perhaps be better illustrated by sharing a tale based on real events.

The year is 1978. The scene transpires in Buenos Aires, Argentina, during the worst dictatorship in the history of Latin America. At the time, thousands of people were being detained without due process, tortured and ultimately disappeared (the infamous term coined to describe unsolved murders because the bodies would be thrown into a vast river, never again to be recovered). Among those kidnapped by the dictators, was Jacob Timerman, a journalist and social justice activist whose work focused on denouncing the crimes against humanity being perpetrated by the regime. Jacobs Rabbi was Marshall Mayer, a Brooklyn-born, Argentine transplant who was a close disciple of Heschel and the founder of both the Latin American conservative movement and the synagogue where my parents got married, I was born and bar mitzvah'd and where Luciana and I also got married. The well documented chronicles described that, in the midst of those dire circumstances, Rabbi Meyer walked one day straight into the generals' headquarters with Jacob's son at his side. He entered the dictator's office and, as he was looking at him in the eye, calmly said: "I am a Shepard and one of my precious sheeps has been stolen from my **rebano**. They tell me you are the thief. And I will not leave until you return the sheep to me." Eventually Jacob was liberated and ultimately exiled to Israel from where he tirelessly continued to denounce injustices, dictatorial regimes while defending those in need. In 1994, the equivalent of the JCC headquarters in Buenos Aires was leveled down by a massive terrorist bombing, killing 86 men, women and children. The attack, as demonstrated by the prosecution, was masterminded and executed by Hezbollah and the Iranian regime, but those responsible were never brought into justice.

Some 30 years after Jacob's release from captivity and about 15 years after the bombing, the democratic Argentinean government engineered an impunity pact with Iran in exchange for commercial business. The architect of that deal and main negotiator was the Argentinian Secretary of State. His name: Hector Timerman, no other than Jacob's son.

The story, as perplexing and shocking as it is, also embodies the complexities and paradoxes of our own behavior and existence. It is also a reminder that each one of us have our own inner Jacobs and Hector. They are both always there, awaiting to be listened to. And although we have the ability to do good and help those that need us the most, we also harbor those latent low instincts that can potentially deviate us from the moral pathway, whether by action or by omission. It always begins with us. We have the responsibility to discern and act consequently. As we close another year and renovate our promise to elevate the father's voice within us and silence or restrain the son's worse instincts, we also pray so that when in doubt or during those difficult and challenging moments of desperation, we listen to the shepard in us so we can stand for injustice, violence and bigotry even when it is not comfortable or at our own risk. Let us pray together so we can distinguish right from wrong, good from evil, moral from immoral. L'shana Tova.