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My friends, I was reminded this week in a powerful and frightening way of a scene from the movie *The Queen*. In this scene, a newly elected Tony Blair is being briefed on protocol before he first meets Queen Elizabeth so she can appoint him to form a government in her name. Mr. Blair is taken aback by the fact that being with the Queen is referred to as being “in the presence.” (I typed that in lower case letters, perhaps violating protocol by doing so.) “In the presence,” as if the Queen was somehow larger than human. I remember thinking at the time that “in the Presence” (which I typed now in uppercase letters) was more appropriate as a reference to God than to a human being, even if she was Queen of England.

The idea of being in the Presence of God is especially appropriate at this time of the Jewish year. From one month before Rosh Hashanah until after Yom Kippur, we add Psalm 27 to our prayers. Listen to a short passage from this beautiful psalm:

Hear, O Lord, my voice when I call; be gracious to me and answer me. To you, said my heart, seek My face; it is Your face, O Lord, that I seek.

This psalm is a psalm of trust in God, even in the face of fright

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or despair. But why do we add it to our daily prayers at this time of year? I did a little research on that subject. First of all, it is a relatively late addition to our prayers. Maimonides didn't know about it, for example, because it was not done in his lifetime. But I did find a list of many reasons we say Psalm 27 now. That probably means no one is certain what the real reason is. I can tell you I found it totally unsatisfying—kabbalistic references, other obscure and esoteric ideas—to me, it is very simple. The Ten Days of Repentance are a time when we seek to feel the presence of God in our lives. Psalm 27 helps us prepare to cultivate that feeling. And this past Wednesday night, I was desperate to feel the presence of God.

It was the night Ian made landfall on the southwest Florida coast, where my sons live in Fort Myers. Why didn't my sons evacuate? It's not so simple, especially the mandatory evacuations. Where are you going to go? To a hotel inland? Good luck finding a room. If you do find a room, how will you get to it? Drive? Good luck finding a gas station with gas, before and after a hurricane. And if you do find gas, you'll likely run out on the highway because of the bumper to bumper traffic.

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Add pets to the mix—evacuation is not simple. My sons stayed by default, not defiance.

My boys lost their power in the early afternoon. A few hours later, we could tell that they had lost their cellular service. We unthinkingly live with the supposition that we can reach our loved ones almost instantaneously at any time, from anywhere. That becomes painfully clear when nature takes this ability away from us. What an awful feeling, knowing that they had no power, not knowing anything else for certain except that we would not be able to contact them that night.

When the hurricane made landfall, we could not help but watch the news. Do you know what it felt like to watch that coverage? It felt like the broadcaster was talking directly to me, saying, “I can tell you something about your sons. They are getting hammered by the worst hurricane ever to hit the west coast of Florida. Have a swell night.”

I’m going to be completely honest—I was flat out afraid, and given that I could not call my boys, what I wanted was to call my mother, may she rest in peace. I did call my brother who did his best to be reassuring, but I was still more frightened than I have been in a long time.

My friends, have you paid attention to Psalm 27, the psalm we recite around Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? It has a verse in it that never resonated with me until Wednesday night:

כִּי־אָבִי וְאִמִּי עֲזָבוּנִי וַיהוָה יֶאֱסֶפֶנִּי:—*Though my father and my mother abandoned me, the Lord will gather me in*¹—the Lord will care for me. I would respond with anger at that verse. My parents did not abandon me. Their time on this earth came to an end. But suddenly, the second half of the verse was coming to my mind, and I began to realize that if I did not want to feel so alone, the answer was prayer. And so I prayed. But I want to tell how I prayed, how I did not pray, and whether it worked.

First of all, when I say I prayed that night, I mean I prayed like I have very few times in my life. When I say I prayed, I prayed! But the first thing I want to tell you is that while I did pray, I did not *daven*. I had already said the evening service for the night. What would be the point of saying it again? If I thought that would have brought be the connection to God I was after, I would have done it, but I knew that it was not my answer. In fact, of all the countless times I have prayed the traditional liturgy, at that moment only one line was coming to my mind,

¹ Ps. 27:10

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but it was a big one! It's actually from the Book of Psalms, but the reason I know it by heart is that it is part of the traditional morning service:

בַּעֲרָב יִלֵּן בְּכִי וְלִבְקָר רָנָה:—at night, weeping may linger, but in the morning there is joy. That did help, but it was still not quite what I needed.

What did I need? In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, in the Book of Lamentations:

שִׁפְךָ כַּמַּיִם לִבְךָ נִכַח פְּנֵי אֲדֹנָי—pour out your heart like water in the presence of the Lord. That was what I had to do. I had to pour out my heart to God, and I began to do so. But this is not where the story ends.

I began to pray. It was maddening—the more I wanted to feel the Divine Presence, the farther removed it seemed. It was like holding a fistful of sand. The harder you squeeze, the more you lose. But I did begin to pray over and over, in English, mind you, “Oh God, please keep them safe.” I did this for a long time, and it did help somewhat, but it could not chase away a great fear I had. I knew my sons were without power, without cellular services, a storm of Biblical proportions was raging, and I knew my boys were afraid and just as I at my age had the urge

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to call my mother, I knew my boys wanted to call us for reassurance but could not. That was when I hit on my answer. I changed my prayer. Without thinking about it, I spontaneously changed to praying, “Oh God, give them strength. Give them the strength to get through this night.” And I also began to ask God for the same thing for myself. God, give me strength.

OK, this is the part when I go sort of Sunday morning TV preacher on you, or at least as close to I’ll come to that. When I began to ask God for strength, I began to feel different. Was it that God was there, when He had not been before? I doubt it. I think the change was in me. But to return to my reference about the Queen and Tony Blair, I felt that I was in The Presence. I was afraid, but not as much. I felt alone, but less so than before, which sounds impossible but it is not. I did not feel as desperate. And the words *בַּעֶרְבַּי לַיְלִין בְּכִי וְלַבֹּקֶר רִנָּה*—*at night, weeping may linger, but in the morning there is joy*, seemed to come alive with new meaning. With those words in my heart, I finally fell asleep.

Before I go any further with my own story, I have to acknowledge that for many, including people whom I have known and loved for many years, the morning brought not joy,

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but the realization of how widespread the devastation was. For many, weeping began with the dawn. But we were lucky.

My cell phone rang early the next morning. It was Sammy, calling to say they were all right. They still had no cell service, but they had driven to a place where there was service so they could call. They had indeed been afraid during the night, but as Sammy said, they had each other. Their apartment sustained insignificant damage specifically, although the complex in general had many uprooted trees, several of which landed on cars. But they were spared even that. My heart was full of a line from the Doxology, “Praise God from Whom all blessings flow.”

Now, the most important issue of the day: why am I telling you this story? What’s in it for you? I’m going to turn back to the Book of Psalms, to Psalm 145 to which we add a few extra verses, resulting in what we call Ashrei:

קָרוֹב יְהוָה לְכָל-קוֹרְאָיו לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרְאוּהוּ בִּאֱמֶת: —*Adonai is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth. To be efficacious, prayer must be rooted in truth. Pouring out your heart like water before God is true prayer. And I have to believe that no matter who you are, how much power you have or how much*

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wealth you have amassed, there have been times in your life and there likely will be again, when you just don't feel big enough or strong enough on your own. You need to draw strength from something bigger and stronger than yourself. By virtue of the fact that you are sitting in synagogue right now, I would suggest that I am talking about times when you, too, need to feel the presence of God. To that end, I have four things for you to take away today:

First, note that what ultimately made me feel connected to God was not via the prayers in a book, but the prayers in my heart. I am frequently asked if there is a Jewish prayer for this or that. I know what the question means: is there a prayer in the prayerbook for the issue. It reflects a widespread perception that the only true Jewish prayers are the ones we find in a book. They are important, but for tonight's subject, it is essential to know that spontaneous prayer is as legitimate in Judaism as the ones in any prayerbook.

Second, I have a reason for including in the story the fact that although some snippets of Hebrew came to me and helped, ultimately it was talking to God in English that made me feel "in The Presence." I tell you this because I have heard too many

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times from people that they can “only” pray in English. If you understand a language, so does God. Feel free to pray in English. How else will you know what you are saying?

I also want this to be clear. Feeling God’s Presence did not make me stop worrying about my boys. Feeling God’s Presence told me that I could survive a night of worry about my boys.

Finally—and this is not a tactic, I really believe this—I think the fact that prayer is a regular part of my life help praying to help me last Wednesday. It was something I was comfortable doing and somewhat familiar with the practice, although this was not my usual prayer experience. But today is Yom Kippur; it is a day for setting goals, and here is a suggestion for a spiritual goal for the year: once a day, check in with God, or if you prefer with the Universe, or substitute any concept that will encourage you to really do this. If it feels awkward at first, persevere. The new becomes natural. And I will be surprised if this practice does not become something you would not want to go without.

Remember the words of Ashrei, my friends: *Adonai is close to all who call Him, to all who call Him in truth.* Along with all the many good things I pray await us in the year to come, should

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a time come when you need to, I pray that you too should be in
“The Presence.”