

Sermon in Song
Cantor Lindsay Kanter
December 17, 2021

In a moment, we'll continue with our musical journey with the singing of *R'tzei*, composed by Stephen Richards. His lush, beautiful composition is mysterious and unusual. The constantly rolling triplets in the accompaniment combined with moody tonalities gives the whole piece a very unsettled feeling. The text, which is relatively short, becomes drawn out and languid, yet restless and filled with urgency. It is a most unusual arrangement for an interesting text.

The text comes from the *Amidah*, our standing prayer that is the core of every Jewish worship service. In our Shabbat *Amidah*, we recite 7 blessings to Adonai. The *R'tzei* text is the 5th blessing, called Avodah, which means service. This refers to the service of animal sacrifices in the days of the Temple. This blessing asks that God accept our prayers, as were the animal sacrifices of old, and concludes by thanking God for (ultimately) restoring God's presence to Zion, referring to both the land of Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

It is a pleading text, asking that our prayers be accepted. This fits interestingly into the overall theme of the *amidah*. According to a Talmudic tradition, *T'filah* must begin and conclude with a scriptural verse expressing the worshipper's stance before God: at the outset, we pray for the ability to praise with the chanting of Adonai S'fatai. At the end, we pray that our words of prayer and meditation may be acceptable in the *Yihyu l'ratzon*. Thus, pleading for acceptance is fundamental to the *Amidah* prayer.

In the *R'tzei*, we approach God with vulnerability, hoping that our prayers are satisfactory, heartfelt, and sincere. Rabbi Ammi taught: A person's prayer is not acceptable unless one's heart is in one's hands, and the *R'tzei* prayer, as sung to Stephen Richard's arrangement, affects me very deeply. When I was a cantorial

student in New York, I completed a unit of chaplaincy at Mount Sinai-Roosevelt Hospital on the Upper west Side. For this 8 week program, I provided pastoral care to several patients every day. It was holy, meaningful work, caring for those who needed a spiritual presence in the hospital. But it was also difficult, challenging, sad, and exhausting.

I spent hours each day, listening intently to patients' innermost feelings, which could be at times uplifting, but also heartbreaking. While I had other colleagues in the program with whom I could share and relate, I felt very alone in my exhaustion and sorrow. Most days, I would find refuge in the hospital chapel. I enjoyed coming to that space, as it was quiet, solemn, and very infrequently visited. It was a place where prayer and emotion were expected, and I felt like I could let it all out there. After a few weeks within the program, I found myself being drawn to the chapel on a daily basis. There, I would take a few minutes to sit quietly with my thoughts and reflect, or, to my initial surprise, take an opportunity to talk to God.

It was in my darker moments that I would talk openly to God, pouring out my sorrow and pain. I found these moments to be truly life altering. I remember one specific incident during a particularly bad day, where I went to the chapel, talked to God, and wept. After I calmed down, I asked myself if I felt heard. The answer was yes: I felt heard, I felt received, and as such, I felt better. I found comfort, and for the first time in my life, I felt connected to God.

God is a complicated subject. In a world in which two-thirds of American Jews believe it is not necessary to believe in God to be Jewish, the idea of believing in God is contentious, controversial, or even seen as unnecessary or inessential to Judaism. Yet, as it states in the *R'tzei* text, *El Karov L'Chol Korav*: God is near to all who call. In a little chapel in a hospital on the Upper West Side of New York, God was there for me when I needed them, when I was calling out in pain. At the end of the chaplaincy program, I joined together with my fellow students in a

closing ceremony, in which we each offered up a piece of religious text that was significant to us. I offered up that meaningful verse from the *R'tzei* prayer: *El Karov L'Chol Korav*: God is near to all who call.

I think of those experiences in the hospital whenever I sing this beautiful arrangement of the *R'tzei* prayer, remembering what it was like to feel close to God when I was in some of my lowest moments. I hope that this text resounds with you in this moment, allowing you to feel connected to something greater than yourselves, even perhaps, connected to God.

(Sing *R'tzei* by Stephen Richards)