

Storm Windows: a Call for Prayerful Activism
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The day was August 26th, 2017, just over a month ago, in Houston, Texas. Greg and Annie Smith looked out the window and prayed. Greg and Annie were new to town and new to Hurricanes. But they looked out the window and they prayed, as they saw that the storm was soon to arrive. They decided they'd leave their home the next morning, before it was too late.

The next morning, they woke up, looked out the window, and saw that the floodwaters were intensifying hours before expected. And so were Annie's contractions. 39 weeks pregnant, and having suffered two miscarriages already, Annie looked out the window, turned to Greg, and said, "I'm really... scared now. This is it - I'm in actual labor." Greg ran to check to see if they could leave-- but the waters were waste deep. They realized they were not going anywhere.... as they looked out the window and prayed.

They called 911 but couldn't get through.
They called the coastguard but couldn't get through.
They called the National Guard; they got through but the troops couldn't get there in time.

As Greg started scrambling in prep for a home-birth, they learned that in their building were a number of medical professionals. One neighbor spread the word to another and another, and in short time they found among neighbors a doctor, a nurse, and an EMT worker.

Annie and Greg came to terms with reality. And they continued looking out the window and praying... as everyone got to work to save Annie and their baby.

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Perhaps you read the story of Annie and Greg, one of countless stories--amid Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, Maria, and Jose—stories of people looking out the window and praying.

Believe it or not, "looking out the window and praying" is an age-old Jewish tradition. In the Talmud, the Sages would argue over the "right way to pray." Rabbi Chiyya bar Aba proclaims: *l'olam yitpalel adam bo b'veit sheyeish*

chalonot, “one must always pray in a house with windows!”¹ Why? Because that’s how Daniel prayed.

It’s a rather out-of-the-blue comment. At first you might think, “cool- this rabbi likes to daydream as much as I do!” But then you take a look at the story of Daniel, and it becomes clear why among the very few rules regarding sanctuaries we still maintain: *that every sanctuary must have windows*. And it’s all because of Daniel.

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Daniel is a tremendously important figure in Judaism, renowned for surviving a day in a lion’s den. For the Rabbis, however, Daniel was most admired for that which led to the lion’s den. How did he even end up in such a treacherous place?

Daniel was basically the first major Jewish leader in the Babylonian exile, banished from Jerusalem. He was an immigrant, an outsider, a Jew who through his genius ascended to become the right hand to the king. Daniel was extraordinarily wise and courageous.

But his wisdom and courage also got him in trouble. He made some enemies--bigots who were jealous because Daniel was the only leader in Babylon wise enough to read “the writing on the wall”-- and I mean that literally! The phrase “reading the writing on the wall” comes from the infamous Banquet of King Belshazzar.

This banquet was a disgusting, immoral mess. The king and his men were all partying with the utensils from the destroyed Temple in Jerusalem. That’s when a magical hand appeared, writing a cryptic message on the wall for all to see. The king trembled with fear. No one could make out the writing--but Daniel could. He had the wisdom and courage to tell the king that the writing foretold the destruction of his kingdom. And that very night the kingdom fell.

Afterwards, Daniel’s enemies plotted against him. When the next king arose, King Darius, they convinced the king to sign an Executive Order banning prayer to the Jewish God. This was no subtle attack; this was targeted. No one else was praying to the Jewish God. No one else even knew how-- not immediately after the Temple was destroyed! When the Temple stood we had a direct line to God, and crystal clear instructions-- the priests did the heavy lifting! We had a way of being forgiven, of saying thanks, of asking God to give us good future.

¹ Berakhot 31a

But after the war, living in Babylon, with no Temple? What then? Enter Daniel: the one who had to figure it out. Daniel had to rewire the connection between Israel and God, in this horrible period of exile and humiliation. Daniel had that burden.

But he had wisdom. And he had courage. The Book of Daniel reads:

“When Daniel learned that the Order was signed he went home, up to the second floor, *v’chavin p’tichan lei*” where the windows were open... and he prayed”²

Daniel, amid the political storm of his time, looked out the window and prayed. Why did he pray at that moment? Perhaps because storms were raging and he felt so powerless. And when storms are raging, what choice is there but to look out the window and pray?

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What choice did Annie and Greg have but to look out the window and pray. As they looked out the window and prayed, they saw that the waters continued rising; they had to get to higher ground. A neighbor, without hesitation, offered her second-floor apartment. They all moved up.

Stuck inside, with hell outside, everyone in their building called whoever they knew who might be able to help them. Some even ran outside, through the treacherous wind and toxic water, to seek out aid for them. Their whole community, most of whom people they met for the first time, went into *prayerful action*, to enable life to triumph over the fiercest storm they had ever known.

* * *

Maybe for Daniel, this brought him back to the worst storm *he’d* ever known, the trauma of the Destruction in Jerusalem-- maybe that’s why he prayed. But that doesn’t entirely explain why he prayed *with the windows open*, immediately after a ban on Jewish prayer. The text doesn’t answer this for us. Did he know that law enforcement would storm in and arrest him? Did he simply trust that he’d survive the eventual punishment of the lion’s den? We don’t know. We just know that for this man, living in exile, when he learned he was being targeted for no good reason by the government, he had to run home, look out the window, and pray.

² Daniel 6:11

And therefore every synagogue in the world today has windows. Jewish leaders to this day point to the windows as a reminder of what the Rabbis taught: when we pray, let's keep the world in our prayers. Rav Kook taught, "prayer is...spiritual work in the soul of one who's praying; but what's needed for it to succeed is the *full knowledge... of the outside world.*"

In other words, whatever you think prayer is, however you think prayer "works," it won't "work" unless you fully bring the outside world into your heart and mind. The soul, the spirit, will not be touched, if we insulate and "soundproof" our sanctuaries from the world outside.

We are living through such mayhem—politically, economically, socially, ecologically. And this moment, more than any other in recent memory, demands that we assume the prayer posture of Daniel. Daniel, who went upstairs, looked out the window, and prayed.

Daniel, who was an immigrant, a foreigner.

Daniel, who was an ethnic minority.

Daniel, who was targeted by Executive Order and arrested for praying.

Daniel, whose legacy bestows our tradition with windows in our sanctuary.

To assume the prayer posture of Daniel, this year, takes a willingness to look out the windows and pray.

To look out the windows and witness the world as it *really* is.

To look out the windows and condemn lies from corrupt leaders whom, we pray, may yet find their ways to moral rehabilitation.

To assume the prayer posture of Daniel is to look out the windows and identify with real suffering;

To look out the windows and be disturbed by Executive Orders of oppression, bills of bigotry, and the mainstreaming of white supremacy.

To look out the windows and hear the cries of those whose lives have been torn apart by this spate of natural disasters, exacerbated by unnatural denial of climate change.

To look out the windows and make space in our hearts for immigrants, who, like Daniel, are just trying to live and thrive in a new and scary place.

But let's get real. We are a community that already has so many people assuming the prayer posture of Daniel. Let's at least recognize that. Since last Yom Kippur, we have spoken about the world beyond those windows on dozens of Shabbatot. Not a week goes by when we do not direct our hearts to the real world. By and large, we *are* assuming the prayer posture of Daniel.

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But here's the rub: there's more to Daniel than his prayer posture. The Rabbis said we have to pray in a room with windows because Daniel had windows. They were trying to figure out the right way to pray. But what if they misread Daniel. What if Daniel wasn't just trying "to figure out prayer," what if Daniel was just trying to figure out life?

He read the Executive Order, he rushed home-- where he thought he would be safe-- he looked out the window, out into the world that was telling him, "you don't belong here!" And he couldn't *live*, he couldn't face the real world head-on, without praying!

Daniel was a leader and a foreigner, trying to do what's right in a dominant culture of corruption. This was a rotten kingdom; a reign with no reverence for dignity. Maybe Daniel *had to pray, windows open*, not out of rote regard for an ancient rite. Maybe Daniel *had to pray* in order to see the world through windows of righteousness and live in the world through windows of obligation.

And maybe, just maybe, Daniel had those windows open not only for when he was inside, but also when he was outside. Windows are two-way: he could look at his house, no matter what hatred he faced in public, as the "alien Jew," and see his windows, hear his heart beating with the rhythm of his morning prayers.

Rabbi Zecher opened our High Holy Days reminding us of our morning prayer, "*Elohai n'shama shenata be t'hora hi*, "God, the soul that you gave me is pure."

Maybe Daniel needed to see his windows from outside to keep rage from eating away at his inside, to guard his soul!

For those among us who are waist deep in the floodwaters of the work to restore dignity to our society; for those in the streets, fighting tirelessly to ease suffering and heal the wounds of depravity: to pray like Daniel, this year, means something different than looking out the windows when you're inside. It means looking inside the windows while you're outside! The hour calls not just for activist prayer, but for prayerful activism!

Daniel didn't just live to pray. He prayed to live.

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Annie and Greg prayed to live. After they made their way upstairs, they looked out the window and prayed. And Greg suddenly exclaimed, “Holy Cow!” They looked out the window and saw a truck filled with firemen. Their neighbors rushed outside, throwing themselves into waist-deep waters, linking arms. They created a human chain.

As Annie said, “I just ... held on to them, one person at a time, and crawled along their arms.” Hours later, in the hospital, Annie gave birth to healthy beautiful baby girl. Her name is Adrielle.

* * *

What will it take for us to build those kinds of “storm windows”? How do we build windows that remind us that we are all a part of the great human chain?

We don't know everything about Daniel. But do know how he built his windows. His windows faced Jerusalem, and he must have made his windows like the windows of the Temple. And we know, from *Midrash Tanhuma*, how those windows in the Temple were built.

Normal windows, the Midrash says, were built wide on the inside and narrow on the outside-- so that light could enter the house. But the windows in the Temple were the opposite-- wide on the outside, narrow within; so that the light of the Temple could shine outward and brighten the world.³ In other words, most windows are built so light can come in. But the Temple's windows were built so that the light inside could emanate outward. *That's* how Daniel made his windows. *That* explains how wherever Daniel went, he could take light with him. Even into the darkness of a lion's den.

Tradition commands us to make our windows like Daniel's. Today, more than any other day, Daniel surely paid attention to those windows--facing the Holy of Holies in space, Jerusalem, on the Holy of Holies in Time, Yom Kippur. Today, more than any other day, we, like Daniel, notice the windows.

Notice the windows, and remember to take care of your heart.
Notice the windows, and remember to kindle anger like a Sabbath candle, not a raging fire.
Notice the windows, and remember that our fight is a holy one.

On this Yom Kippur 5778, we look out the windows and pray:

³ Midrash Tanhuma, T'tzaveh 7

Eloheinu vEilohei Avoteinu V'Imoteinu,
Our God and God of our Fathers and Mothers:

Bless us on this day.

When we sit in the sanctuary, may we look out the windows, with our eyes wide open and our hearts willing to be broken.

When we stand outside the sanctuary, may we look into the windows, so the light and love can pour into our broken hearts.

And may we embody the wisdom and courage of Daniel, as we embark on a momentous year in relentless pursuit of justice, truth, and peace.

Amen.