

Amy Sexauer:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Amy Sexauer:

Welcome to the Appleton Chapel here in our Memorial Church, for our daily service of morning prayers. Our guest speaker this morning is Rena Cohen. She is a publicist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra and previously a choral fellow here with us. I invite you all, if you are able, to please rise and join me in reading our responsive Psalm found in your black Psalter, Psalm 84, "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts."

Congregation:

"My soul longs, indeed it faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh sing for joy to the living God."

Amy Sexauer:

"Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at Your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God."

Congregation:

"Happy are those who live in Your house, ever singing Your praise."

Amy Sexauer:

"Happy are those whose strength is in You, in whose heart are the highways to Zion."

Congregation:

"As they go through the valley of Baca, they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools."

Amy Sexauer:

"Behold our shield, O God, look on the face of Your anointed."

Congregation:

"For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than live in the tents of wickedness."

Amy Sexauer:

"For the Lord God is a sun and shield; He bestows favor and honor. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly."

Congregation:

"Lord of hosts, happy is everyone who trusts in You."

Amy Sexauer:

You may be seated.

MUSIC:

[foreign language 00:04:35].

Rena Cohen:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Rena Cohen:

I'd like to begin with a reading we say in the Compline Responses, though part of it is originally from Psalm 17, "Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit. Keep me as the apple of an eye. Hide me under the shadow of thy wings."

As many of you know, Compline is an evening service that originated in monastic communities sometime around the 5th or 6th century. The name comes from the Latin word Completorium, as Compline completes the working day, serving as the final liturgy before a night of sleep.

Here at Memorial Church, Compline is a beautiful candlelit service that includes music, readings, psalms, and time for quiet reflection. Quick plug. The next one is 9:00 PM on Thursday, November 7th, and you should absolutely go, if you can.

I didn't grow up with Compline, but my family had its own special nighttime ritual of prayer. Every evening, my parents would come into my room at bedtime and say the Shema. The Shema is one of the most central prayers in Judaism, sort of like the Lord's Prayer in Christianity, and it is a commandment to recite it daily.

Beginning, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God. The Lord is one," the Shema grandly proclaims God's singularity and majesty. But to the end of this very vast prayer, my parents tacked on a more personal verse that they chosen from the medieval hymn, Adon Olam, which we also occasionally sung at morning prayers, "Into His hand, I commend my spirit when I sleep and when I wake, and with my spirit and my body, the Lord is with me, I shall not fear."

So, this idea of commending my spirit away in sleep was with me long before I joined UChoir and sang my first Compline. I always looked forward to getting my Shema before bed, as we called it. It was the kind of simple, yet deeply meaningful routine, that makes a kid feel stable and loved. But the significance of the Shema changed one night when I was seven years old.

Earlier that day, I'd gone on a school field trip and I hadn't hydrated as much, as usual. I came home, got my Shema, went to bed, and woke up about an hour later feeling very strange. I tried to speak or call out from my parents, but the words in my brain could not translate through my body. I tried to get out of bed, but my limbs refused to move as they should. I started throwing up.

Eventually, my parents heard my uncontrolled grunts and movements, ran to my room and realized that something was very wrong. They called an ambulance. I had had my first grand mal seizure. The coming

weeks and months would bring many doctor's appointments, medical tests, more seizures, and changes to my nighttime ritual.

My parents installed a video baby monitor, as well as a motion sensor monitor, under my mattress that would chime with the sound of electronic church bells, ironically enough, whenever I rolled around too much. "Accident!" I would cry towards their room when I set off the monitor during my normal tossing and turning of falling asleep. As a fail-safe, I also wore physical bells that my mom sewed to a cuff bracelet and had a hotel bellhop style bell at the side of my bed that I could ring for help. Many nights, my mom stayed in my room to keep watch as I fell asleep, and sometimes she would stay the whole night.

Through this period, my parents kept saying the Shema prayer that they'd cobbled together from those two sources, ending with the, "Into His hand, I commend my spirit when I sleep and when I wake," part. But those words had gained a scary new resonance. Each night, they handed over the spirit of their young daughter to something outside their control, be it God or biology or some powerful mix.

Over time, we've talked more about how deeply scary this time was for them, a feeling that I understand more and more as I get closer to parenthood myself. And yet, though the seizures themselves were strange and unpleasant, I don't remember feeling scared at all. I think now of the second part of the Adon Olam verse that my parents had chosen to add, "And with my spirit, my body, the Lord is with me, I shall not fear." I had faith. In what exactly, I don't know. I was seven. But the Shema's contents, consistency and loving messengers of my two parents reminded me that I was not alone, even in my very vulnerable state of sleep.

About a year later, my doctors landed on the right medicine and I stopped having seizures. By high school, I no longer had to sleep with a monitor or bells or even take medicine. I could go to sleepovers and learn to drive, just like all of my friends. I was very lucky.

I don't often think about my seizures anymore and I speak about them even less. I think this is the only time I've written about them or mentioned them publicly. But I share this story because I think that many people have experienced feeling out of control of their bodies in some way, be it epilepsy, nightmares, sleepless nights consumed by anxiety, addictions, or other mental or physical health conditions that remove one sense of control or autonomy.

In situations like these, I look to the second two lines of the Compline prayer that I started with, "Keep me as the apple of an eye. Hide me under the shadow of thy wings." To know that someone is watching out for you, be it God or your parents or your community, whether or not you believe they can control the outcome is a powerful feeling. To know that they are with you in darkness, that you are the apple of their eye, is both the only and the best thing that one can offer in these uncontrollable situations.

Prayer is not the only way to do this, but it is a powerful one. So, I invite you all to rise, if you are able, and pray with me. May the God of our ancestors watch over us all in the morning and at night and may we watch over one another, spreading comforting wings over the vulnerable and providing strength and steadiness through the uncontrollable. And let us say Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Amy Sexauer:

Let us pray together the way that Jesus taught us. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation,

but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.
Please join in singing our concluding hymn. Number five. Now Thank We All Our God.

MUSIC:

Now thank we all our God.
With heart and hands and voices.
Who wondrous things has done.
In whom His world rejoices.
Who from our mothers' arms.
Has blessed us on our way.
With countless gifts of love.
And still is ours today.
O may this bounteous God.
Through all our life be near us.
With ever joyful hearts.
And blessed peace to cheer us.
And keep us in His grace.
And guide us when perplexed.
And free us from all ills.
Of this world in the next.
All praise and thanks to God.
The Father now be given.
The Son, and Him who reigns.
With them in highest heaven.
The one eternal God.
Whom earth and heaven adore.
For thus it was, is now.
And shall be evermore.

Amy Sexauer:

Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Amy Sexauer:

Let us bless the Lord.

This transcript was exported on Oct 21, 2024 - view latest version [here](#).

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.