

We All Need God: Praying as a Modern Jew

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I would like to continue our conversation on Prayer that we began on Rosh HaShanah. We need to look at the institution of prayer to see what is broken and how we can fix it.

Consider this quote from a Jewish newspaper:

It is no secret that the communal prayer experience of modern, socially integrated Jews in Western countries is deeply degraded...Prayer feels like a forced conversation with a distant uncle, trying to elicit fragments of ancient family history, yet grateful for any possible interruption...

This was a statement made by a modern Orthodox rabbi in the Jewish newspaper *The Forward* in reaction to the printing of a new Orthodox prayer book—the Koren/Sacks siddur, which is a beautiful siddur. In his article: “Even a new siddur can't close the God gap”, Rabbi Saul Berman makes the case that the central problem of prayer is not the prayer book and its commentaries, directions or translations. The central problem of prayer today are the pray-ers themselves, the people who hold the prayer-books and their connection to God, or lack of it. Rabbi Berman makes that case that the original reasons for prayer, what motivated people to pray in the past, is no longer at play in our modern lives as Jews.

“Effective prayer is a vibrant conversation between an individual or a community, and God. But modern western civilization has, in four separate ways, distanced us from God.” First, we don't depend on God or nature for our success in work and supporting ourselves. “How can you meaningfully talk to God is you work in a factory or a bank, or in a store or in an office?” asks Rabbi Berman.

Second, technological advancements have created the false “impression that solutions to all human problems, from medical to environmental to emotional, reside completely in human hands. Are you going to ask God about your latest lab results, or why your email stopped working, or what you can do about the melting of the polar ice caps?” We don't have the patience for the eternal divine-human partnership when we are accustomed to “instant technological fixes to all problems.”

Third, because of our communal comfort we have no fear that motivates us to reach beyond ourselves. We are safe and do not live in fear of pogroms, wild beasts or many of the dangers experienced by our ancestors. And, last, we have no faith that if we do need something from God, God can or will provide. Our modern theology based on medieval Jewish rationalist philosophy denies God's providence in regulating every occurrence in our lives...and if God is not in control, then what need do we have for God.

Our modern lives have lulled us into believing that we don't need God so therefore the prayers are no longer necessary in our lives. We read the words without any sense of urgency or purpose because we don't find any place in our lives where God really needs to be.

But, that isn't true. Rabbi Berman knows it isn't true as well. He exhorts us to open up and allow God into our lives, to allow God's presence to travel with us and guide our steps.

We need God in our modern, comfortable, technologically advanced lives. It is so clear from the year

gone by that our society is lacking...and that includes religious communities as well. The two biggest scandals in the past year involved religious Jews—Bernie Madoff and the rabbis from South Jersey—who had separated their relationship with God from their relationship with others. When it is ok to steal, to violate the law and harm others, than God is absent. God has been shut out of decision-making processes and overlooked in the eyes of our fellow human beings.

In our modern, technologically advanced world, we are able to connect with others in ways we never could before and yet we have also been isolated and made lonely by technology. For many of us technology has enabled us to maintain relationships and connections. Our aupair can talk with her family in Israel on the computer, using Skype, every day. Families can share lifecycle events using the internet—Sima Jelin had a beautiful piece published in the Jewish News about how she and Sidney sitting in New Jersey were able to witness and be a part of the bris of their great-grandson which took place in California.

And yet, technology has also isolated us, making us discrete individuals with no need for others, for libraries, or for conversations. I am astonished as I walk down the streets in Manhattan to see how many people are cut off from others with *iPods* or cellphones attached to their ears. We are alone against the world and so often lonely. We need connection, we need relationship, we need God's presence in our lives.

Every year as I prepare for Kol Nidre I ask myself the same question. Why do people come to services? Why this night do we come in the hundreds and not on Simhat Torah which is so much more fun, joyful and engaging—and happens two weeks from now, Saturday night, October 10th? *Why do we come to synagogue at all?* What personal needs do synagogue services fulfill and how can we each get more out of it—so that services are not forced conversations that are endured but opportunities for meaningful engagement with God and others.

There is a large percentage of us who come to synagogue because we feel obligated. Either we take to heart the commandment to pray and our obligation or *hiyyuv* to engage in daily worship; or we feel obligated by our folk tradition. Our great-grandparents, grandparents and parents attending synagogue on Yom Kippur, on the holidays, and/or on Shabbat, they taught us to do the same and so we continue that chain of tradition. Coming to synagogue then connects us with our ancestors and it connects us with our community.

If what draws us to synagogue is the performance of ritual alone or the social dynamic, then there is not much need for the words and messages of the prayers. Jeremy Schonfield in his book “Undercurrents of Jewish Prayer” takes an in-depth look at why the study of prayer has been neglected in contrast to the intellectual energies we have invested in Torah and other rabbinic traditions like Talmud and halacha. He traces the priority Jewish law placed on the performative, ritual nature of Temple service and how that got translated to our prayer service. He also tries to pull apart the various reasons that we have neglected the study of the prayer book and suffered mind-numbing isolation from the universal lessons and sacred meaning prayer offers.

One reason Schonfield offers is that the social role of worship has taken precedence. “Sociologically speaking, prayer-meetings make possible the daily renewal of communal ties...and reinforce social identification. The role of the synagogue in community-building is confirmed by the predominance of the first person plural in the liturgy, supporting the view that the prayer-book may provide an aural backdrop for a social gathering and not solely a text for solitary meditation.” (p.31 Schonfield) The prayers become the setting for our meeting with each other, rather than the occasion to meet with God

and grow in soul from the experience.

We need to be able to join together to share traditions, support each other on life's journey and organize ourselves to make a positive impact on our community and on our world. There is a great need in our world for social and communal Jewish organizations that grow out of vibrant synagogues like ours. And yet, if this is all that we use synagogue for, if this is the only reason that we come to pray, then the prayers have no sacred value and their spiritual resonance and eternal messages will be lost on a generation that is already isolated from God and divine purpose.

We need God in our lives. We need meaning and purpose, beauty and hope. These are the gifts of faith that are made more accessible through prayer. As Rabbi David Wolpe teaches in his book “Why Faith Matters,” prayer fulfills our need for God's presence in our lives and in our world. Listen to how Rabbi Wolpe writes about this core human need:

“The desire for God is a deep one. As with other essential needs, it has a genuine means of satisfaction. What we need for life actually does exist: Satisfying the need for food, there is bread. Satisfying the need for rest, there is sleep. Satisfying the need for expression, there is language. Satisfying the need for transcendence, there is the presence of God.” (p.116)

Prayer is the medium through which we experience the presence of God. Prayer is a conversation with the God who offers us hope, support, love and a listening presence. If we come to synagogue with this understanding, then we come to prayer to encounter God, to experience God in our lives, to cultivate our soul so that it is strengthened and invigorated to return to the world of work, technology, insecurity and threat. Who among us does not need more love or hope or support in his or her life? Who among us is confident that there is nothing more to prayer than ancient formulas that no longer work their magic? Who among us can be certain that the heart of prayer will not speak to his or her heart and buoy our souls to live better lives?

We also come to prayer out of a sense of awe and gratitude. Sometimes what we have experienced in the world fills us with a sense of mystery and astonishment, what Rabbi Heschel described as “radical amazement.” Whether we are overwhelmed by the gift of a new child in our family, or new medicine for our illness...Whether we are awed by the beauty of a sunset, the majestic nature of mountains and glaciers, the simple peace of the dawn as we walk through the world...Whether we are thankful for new beginnings, a new job, the strength to keep going and working and loving and living...Engulfed in these feelings, we come to prayer to respond to our world rather than understand our world. We come for an experience.

Rabbi Wolpe teaches: “Deep prayer is an experience like music or love—indescribable to one who does not pray. Prayer works through you. To be carried away is to be in prayer. To be expressively in touch with something greater is prayer. Prayer is not the same as poetry; prayer is directed to God. I may read a poem and glory in its imagery; when I recite a prayer I am grateful for having been heard.”

Rabbi Wolpe challenges us to view prayer not just as an intellectual exercise that connects us with our ancestors and ingrains upon our minds through repetition our people's history and beliefs...Prayer is a conversation, an experience, we are having with God. It is not our attempt to control God, or manipulate God, but our attempt to reach out and connect ourselves with something beyond ourselves, something greater than ourselves...to connect with God.

“A seventeenth-century rabbi, Leona Medina, explained it this way: If you watch a man out on a boat

grab a rope and pull his boat to shore you might think, if you were confused about weight and motion, that he was really pulling the shore / to his boat. People have much the same confusion with spiritual weight and motion, cautions Rabbi Wolpe: In prayer, some believe that you are pulling God closer to you. But in fact the heartfelt prayer pulls you closer to God.” (p.142)

Prayer is meant to inspire faith. Through repetition, the use of soulful melodies, rhythms like drums, haunting or joyful music from instruments like flute and strings...all these expressions of prayer are meant to offer us ways to break down our defenses and open ourselves up to the experience of prayer. We aren't bringing into the service new music and new sounds, new settings and new readings, just because we want to be different, change for change's sake alone. We are pushing the bounds of our traditional prayer experience so that we can each experience prayer as it is meant to be experienced. We are meant to feel it, to mean it, to understand it. We are meant to be lifted up by prayer, elevated, brought to a new place of meaning, contentment, security.

Every morning and every evening we are commanded to recite the Shema and Ve-Ahavta...

V'ahavta et Adonai elohekha b'chal l'vav'cha u'v'chol nafshecha u'v'chol m'odekha.

You shall love Adonai *Your* God with all our heart, with all your soul and with all your might....with your presence, your body, and with your spirit, emotion and energy, and with your mind, your creativity, your understanding. You must be fully engaged in prayer to engage God. We need to bring all of ourselves to synagogue and to the sanctuary.

V'hayu haDevarim ha-eleh asher anochi m'tzav'cha ha-yom al l'va'vecha

And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart...

Upon your heart....The Rabbi of Kotzk asked, why ON your heart and not IN your heart. Isn't that the true aim, for the words to be in your heart, beloved and a part of your every breath and thought? So why ON the heart.

The Kotzker Rebbe's answer is this: “Hearts are not always open. If you place the words on your heart, when the heart is more receptive, they will sink in and there unfold their deeper meaning.”(Wolpe, p.117)

So much of our experience in this life and this world has caused us to close our hearts. We have closed our hearts in fear; we have closed our hearts in disappointment, anger and doubt. If we place the words before our eyes, upon our doorposts, if we speak the words throughout the day, when we lie down and when we rise up, when we are filled with joy and when we are filled with doubt...they will seep in to our souls, they will open up new doorways, they will help us find God in the world once again.

And, if we are unsure of God's existence in our lives, or God's existence in the world, prayer is our opportunity to experience our doubts and ask our questions. As God calls out to us and asks us “Ayeka” where are you, as God asked Adam in the garden.....in prayer we call out to God, Ayekah, where are you God? We need you! We need to know that we are not alone! We need to know that no matter what happens in the world, no matter what happens to our loved ones, no matter what happens to us...we will not be alone. You are there. You will give us hope, strength, comfort and the capacity to face whatever the world throws at us.

Rabbi Wolpe speaks very openly in his powerful book and shares his prayers and hopes:

“Throughout my various illnesses I prayed. My prayer was not answered because I lived; my prayer was answered because I felt better able to cope with my sickness. Each time I go for my regular tests, the CT or PET scans or an MRI, each time I am move into the metal tube that will give an image of sickness or health, I pray. I do not pray because I believe God will give me a clear scan. I pray because

I am not alone, and from gratitude that having been near death I am still in life. I pray not for magic but for closeness, not for miracles but for love.”

We each face numerous challenges in our lives. We come to this Yom Kippur with fears and concerns. I look out at this beautiful congregation and I see individuals who worry for their children's health, individuals who worry about their own health, they worry about the results of their CT's and MRI's. I see individuals who worry about supporting their family, how they will find a job, how they will keep a job, how they will be able to provide healthcare, food, schooling and housing for their family. I see individuals who are struggling to maintain their faith in God and in humanity. Individuals who are struggling to live, to be happy, to see the world as a place of joy and blessings rather than darkness and fear.

And, we come to this Yom Kippur with blessings and much for which we can be grateful. We are here. For another year. For another Yom Kippur. We are surrounded by a caring, concerned community. We live in vibrant communities, in a free country, in a time when technological advancements continue to make our lives easier. We have the Land of Israel. We have great opportunities and support services from our Metrowest federation...Take a moment, close your eyes, or look around, to find your personal blessings.....I see individuals with loving parents, loving spouses and loving children. I see people blessed with life in the face of cancer, in the face of chronic disease, in the face of mental illness and in the face of trauma. I see individuals who are blessed with the gift of breath, the gift of expression, and the capacity to come to this moment and open up our hearts and souls and minds.

The prayer book provides us with the formula for fulfilling our obligation to prayer and maintain Jewish community and the institution of prayer. The prayer book provides us with a history of the encounter of our people with a living God. The prayer book speaks to us in the language of revelation and calls us to engage and respond to God's calling. The prayer book is just a book filled with words if the one who holds the book does not understand, does not feel anything, is not open to the experience of meaning and transcendence prayer offers.

As we pray this Yom Kippur. As we encounter the words of our tradition and the new interpretations brought to those words, may we be open. May the words fill a deep need we all have to connect with God and experience God's love, support and presence. Each time we beat on our hearts during the confessional prayers, may we break through the many barriers to penetration we have placed upon our hearts and minds. May the words penetrate our hearts and souls and inspire us to begin a new year with new energy, renewed spirit and renewed attention to the discipline of the soul called prayer.

Y'hi'yu l'ratzon imri finu v'hegyon libeinu l'fanecha Adonai tzureinu v'go'aleinu.

May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, my God, our Rock and our Redeemer.