

Prayer

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Man's Quest for God, Abraham Joshua Heschel

Studies in Prayer and Symbolism

Preface

...

We are losing the power for self-expression, because genuine self-expression is *an answer to an ultimate question*, but we do not hear the ultimate question any more. We have lost any understanding for man's supreme concern, because such understanding is found not through self-inspection but through self-attachment to Him who is concerned with man.

To be sensitive to the ultimate question one must have the ability to surpass the self, the ability to know that the self is more than the self; that our highest concern is not our own concern; that our supreme standard is not expediency.

We are forfeiting the power to transcend the self and have become unable to transcend the mind. There is such an abundance of the here and the now, such plenitude of the given and the conceived that our mind has lost itself in the world. All we can trust in is the work of our hands, the product of our minds, and what lies beyond it is considered an illegitimate fancy. The world to us consists of instruments, of tools, and the supreme ideas are symbols only. *God is a name but no reality*. The standard of action is expediency, and God, too, is for the sake of our satisfaction.

Now, this seems to be a fact: God is of no concern to us. But there is another startling fact. His being of no concern to us has become a profound concern. We are concerned with our lack of concern.

God may be of no concern to man, but man is of much concern to God. The only way to discover this is the ultimate way, the way of worship. For worship is a way of living, a way of seeing the world in the light of God. ... We have lost the power to pray because we have lost the sense of His reality. ...

God is of no importance unless He is of supreme importance. It is hard to define religion; it is hard to place its wealth of meaning into the frame of a single sentence. But surely one thing may be said negatively: *religion is not expediency*. If all our actions are guided by one consideration, how best to serve our personal interests, it is not God whom we serve but the self. True, the self has its legitimate claims and interests; the persistent denial of the self, the defiance of one's own desire for happiness is not what God demands. But to remember that the love of God is for all men, for all creatures; to remember His love and His claim to love in making a decision — this is the way He wants us to live. To worship God is to forget the self. It is in such instants of worship that

man acts as a symbol of Him.

Of all things we do prayer is the least expedient, the least worldly, the least practical. This is why prayer is an act of self-purification. This is why prayer is an ontological necessity.

...

What goes on in the depth of our lives has a profound effect upon the international situation. Others may suffer from degradation by poverty; we are threatened by degradation through power. Power corrupts, and it is only the acceptance of the spirit of God that saves, that prevents disaster, that ennobles both body and soul.

The acceptance of the spirit is prayer — prayer as a way of insight, not as a way of speaking. Prayer may not save us, but prayer makes us worth saving.

Of all the sacred acts, first comes prayer. Religion is not “what man does with his solitariness.” Religion is what man does with the presence of God. And the spirit of God is present whenever we are willing to accept it. True, God is hiding His face in our time, but He is hiding because we are evading Him.

A.J.H.

1. The Inner World

The Sigh

About a hundred years ago, Rabbi Isaac Meir Alter of Ger pondered over the question of what a certain shoemaker of his acquaintance should do about his morning prayer. His customers were poor men who owned only one pair of shoes. The shoemaker used to pick up their shoes at a late evening hour, work on them all night and part of the morning, in order to deliver them before their owners had to go to work. When should the shoemaker say his morning prayer? Should he pray quickly the first thing in the morning, and then go back to work? Or should he let the appointed hour of prayer go by and, every once in a while, raising his hammer from the shoes, utter a sigh: “Woe unto me, I haven't prayed yet!”? Perhaps that sigh is worth more than prayer itself.

We, too, face this dilemma of wholehearted regret or perfunctory fulfillment. Many of us regretfully refrain from habitual prayer, waiting for an urge that is complete, sudden, and unexampled. But the unexampled is scarce, and perpetual refraining can easily grow into a habit. We may even come to forget what to regret, what to miss.

The Ability to Answer

We do not refuse to pray. We merely feel that our tongues are tied, our minds inert, our inner vision dim, when we are about to enter the door that leads to prayer. We do not refuse to pray; we abstain from it. ... Accepting surmises as dogmas, and prejudices as solutions, we ridicule the evidence of life for what is more than life. Our mind has ceased to be sensitive to the wonder. Deprived of the power of devotion to what is more

important than our individual fate, steeped in passionate anxiety to survive, we lose sight of what fate is, of what living is. Rushing through the ecstasies of ambition, we only awake when plunged into dread or grief. In darkness, then, we grope for solace, for meaning, for prayer.

But there is a wider voluntary entrance to prayer than sorrow and despair — the opening of our thoughts to God. We cannot make Him visible to us, but we can make ourselves visible to Him. ...

To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is *our* humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living. It is all we can offer in return for the mystery by which we live. Who is worthy to be present at the constant unfolding of time? Amidst the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers — wiser than all alphabets — clouds that die constantly for the sake of His glory, *we* are hating, hunting, hurting. Suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit glory in nature. It is so embarrassing to live! How strange we are in the world, and how presumptuous our doings! Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder, for the gift of our unearned right to serve, to adore, and to fulfill. It is gratefulness which makes the soul great.

However, we often lack the strength to be grateful, the courage to answer, the ability to pray. ...

The Essence of Spiritual Living

As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself. Without the holy, the good turns chaotic; without the good, beauty becomes accidental. ...

Prayer is our attachment to the utmost. ... We do not step out of the world when we pray; we merely see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub, but the spoke of the revolving wheel. In prayer we shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender. God is the center toward which all forces tend. He is the source, and we are the flowing of His force, the ebb and flow of His tides.

Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest, and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy. For when betake ourselves to the extreme opposite of the ego, we can behold a situation from the aspect of God. ... It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say. For the accord of assertion and conviction, of thought and conscience, is the basis of all prayer.

Prayer teaches us what to aspire to. So often we do not know what to cling to. Prayer implants in us the ideals we ought to cherish. Redemption, purity of mind and tongue or

willingness to help, may hover as ideas before our mind, but the idea becomes a concern, something to long for, a goal to be reached, when we pray: “Guard my tongue from evil and my lips from speaking guile; and in the face of those who curse me, let my soul be silent.”¹

Prayer is the essence of spiritual living. Its spell is present in every spiritual experience. Its drive enables us to delve into what is what beneath our beliefs and desires, and to emerge with a renewed taste for the infinite simplicity of the good. ...

However, prayer is no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It is in this light that we who grope, stumble, and climb, discover where we stand, what surrounds us, and the course which we should choose. ...

Sometimes prayer is more than a light before us; it is a light within us. Those who have once been resplendent with this light find little meaning in speculations about the efficacy of prayer. A story is told about a Rabbi who once entered heaven in a dream. He was permitted to approach the temple of Paradise where the great sages of the Talmud, the Tannaim, were spending their eternal lives. He saw that they were just sitting around tables studying the Talmud. The disappointed Rabbi wondered, “Is this all there is to Paradise?” But suddenly he heard a voice, “You are mistaken. The Tannaim are not in Paradise. Paradise is in the Tannaim.”

Man's Ultimate Aspiration

In those souls in which prayer is a rare flower, enchanting, surprising, it seems to come to pass by the lucky chance of misfortune, as an inevitable or adventitious by-product of affliction. But suffering is not the source of prayer. A motive does not bring about an act as a cause produces an effect; it merely stimulates the potential into becoming an actuality. ...

Prayer is not a soliloquy. But is it a dialogue with God?² Does man address Him as person to person? It is incorrect to describe prayer by analogy with human conversation; we do not communicate with God. We only make ourselves communicable to Him. Prayer is an emanation of what is most precious in us toward Him, the outpouring of the heart before Him. It is not a relationship between person and person, between subject and subject, but an endeavor to become the object of His thought.

...Prayer is an answer to God: “Here am I. And this is the record of my days. Look into my heart, into my hopes and my regrets.” ... To pray is to behold life not only as a result

¹ From the daily liturgy.

² Prayer is defined as a dialogue with God by Clement of Alexandria. See Max Pohlenz, *Die Stoa*, Geschichte einer geistigen Bewegung, Goettingen, 1948 Vol. I, p. 423.

of His power, but as a concern of His will, or to strive to make our life a divine concern.

...

God is not alone when discarded by man. But man is alone. To avoid prayer constantly is to force a gap between man and God which can widen into an abyss. But sometimes, awakening on the edge of despair to weep, and arising from forgetfulness, we feel how yearning moves in softly to become the lord of a restless breast, and we pass over the gap with the lightness of a dream.

The Nature of *Kavanah*

... Yet, what is the nature of *kavanah* or inner participation? Is it paying attention to the context of the fixed texts? Thinking? Prayer is not thinking. To the thinker, God is an object; to the man who prays, He is the subject. Awakening in the presence of God, we strive not to acquire objective knowledge, but to deepen the mutual allegiance of man and God. ...

The laws of science we comprehend as rational concepts in critical understanding, while the mercy and greatness of the Infinite we absorb as a mystery. Prayer is a spiritual source in itself. Though not born of an urge to learn, it often endows us with insights not attainable by speculation. It is in prayer that we obtain the subsidy of God for the failing efforts of our wisdom.

But prayer goes beyond the scope of emotion; it is the approach of the human to the transcendent. Prayer makes man a relative to the sublime, initiating him into the mystery. ... The will to pray opens the gates, but what enters is not its product. ... Thus, inclination to pray is not prayer. Deeper forces and qualities of the soul must be mobilized before prayer can be accomplished. To pray is to pull ourselves together, to pour our perception, volition, memory, thought, hope, feeling, dreams, all that is moving in us, into one tone. Not the words we utter, the service of the lips, but the way in which the devotion of the heart corresponds to what the words contain, the consciousness of speaking under His eyes, is the pith of prayer.

For neither the lips nor the brain are the limits of the scene in which prayer takes place. Speech and devotion are functions auxiliary to a metaphysical process. Common to all men who pray is the certainty that prayer is an act which makes the heart audible to God. ... Essential is the metaphysical rather than the physical dimension of prayer. Prayer is not a thought that rambles alone in the world, but an event that starts in man and ends in God. What goes on in our heart is a humble preliminary to an event in God.

... However, there are hours that perish and hours that join the everlasting. Prayer is a crucible in which time is cast in the likeness of the eternal. Man hands over his time to God in the secrecy of single words. When anointed by prayer, his thoughts and deeds do not sink into nothingness, but merge into the end knowledge of an all-embracing God. ...

An Invitation to God

To many psychologists, prayer is but a function, a shadow cast by the circumstances of our lives, growing and diminishing in accordance with our various needs and wants. Consequently, to understand the nature of prayer, it is enough to become familiar with the various occasions on which it is offered. But is it possible to determine the value of a work of art by discovering the occasion of its creation? ... The factor which induces a person to pray [is not] the essence of prayer. The essence is inherent in the act of prayer itself. It can be detected only inside the consciousness of man during the act of worship.

... The hope of results may be the motive that leads the mind into prayer, but not the content which fills the worshiper's consciousness in the essential moment of prayer. The artist may give a concert for the sake of the promised remuneration, but, in the moment when he is passionately seeking with his fingertips the vast swarm of swift and secret sounds, the consideration of subsequent reward is far from his mind. His whole being is immersed in the music. ... Only by wholehearted devotion to his trade, can he produce a consummate piece of craftsmanship. Prayer, too, is primarily *kavanah*, the yielding of the entire being to one goal, the gathering of the soul into focus.

The focus of prayer is not the self. A man may spend hours meditating about himself, or be stirred by the deepest sympathy for his fellow man, and no prayer will come to pass. Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of our personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feeling becomes prayer in the moment in which we forget ourselves and become aware of God. When we analyze the consciousness of a supplicant, we discover that it is not concentrated upon his own interests, but on something beyond the self. The thought of personal need is absent, and the thought of divine grace alone is present in his mind. Thus, in beseeching Him for bread, there is one instant, at least, in which our mind is directed neither to our hunger nor to food, but to His mercy. This instant is prayer.

We start with a personal concern and live to feel the utmost. For the fate of the individual is a counterpoint in a larger theme. In prayer we come close to hearing the eternal theme and discerning our place in it. It is as if our life were a seamless garment, continuous with the Infinite. ...

Prayer is an invitation to God to intervene in our lives... We submit our interests to His concern, and seek to be allied with what is ultimately right. Our approach to the holy is not an intrusion, but an answer. ...

The purpose of prayer is not the same as the purpose of speech. The purpose of speech is to inform; the purpose of prayer is to partake.

In speech, the act and the content are not always contemporaneous. What we wish to communicate to others is usually present in our minds prior to the moment of

communication. In contrast, the actual content of prayer comes into being in the moment of praying. For the true content of prayer, the true sacrifice we offer, is not the prescribed word which we repeat, but the response to it, the self-examination of the heart, the realization of what is at stake in living as a child of God, as a part of Israel. These elements which constitute the substance of prayer come into being within prayer.

...

The quality of a speech is not judged by the good intention of the speaker but by the degree to which it succeeds to simplify an idea and to make it relevant to others. In contrast, the goal of prayer is to simplify the self and to make God relevant to oneself. Thus, prayer is judged not by standards of rhetoric but by the good intention, by the earnestness and intensity of the person.

Ultimately the goal of prayer is not to translate a word but to translate the self; not to render an ancient vocabulary in modern terminology, but to transform our thoughts into thoughts of prayer. Prayer is the soul's *imitation of the spirit*, of the spirit that is contained in the liturgical word.

Spiritual Ecstasy

The thirst for companionship, which drives us so often into error and adventure, indicates the intense loneliness from which we suffer. ... It is such a sense of solitude which prompts the heart to seek the companionship of God. ...

Only the concern for our inalienable share in the unknown holds our inner life together. It enables us to grasp the utopia of faith, to divine what is desirable to God, aspiring to be, not only a part of nature, but a partner of God. The sacred is a necessity in our lives, and prayer is born of this necessity. Through prayer we sanctify ourselves, our feelings, our ideas. Everyday things become sacred when prayed for to God.

...

Prayer is *spiritual ecstasy*. It is as if all our vital thoughts in fierce ardor would burst the mind to stream toward God. A keen single force draws our yearning for the utmost out of the seclusion of the soul. We try to see our vision in His light, to feel our life as His affair. ...

At the beginning of all action is an inner vision in which things to be are experienced as real. Prayer, too, is frequently an inner vision, an intense dreaming for God — the reflection of the Divine intentions in the soul of man. ... We anticipate the fulfillment of the hope shared by both God and man. To pray is to dream in league with God, to envision His holy visions.

2. The Person and the Word

The Dignity of Words

Studies about prayer are usually concerned with the person who prays — his feelings or motivations, with the text of prayer — its history, content or style, or with the theme of prayer —

praise, petition or confession. Our concern here will be to explore the act of praying. This is our question: What is taking place when a person is praying?

It takes two things to make prayer come to pass: a person and a word. In scholarly studies, these two components appear as if they existed loosely one beside the other; each of them is separately discussed and independently classified. However, as long as person and word are apart, there is no praying. A word detached from the person is numb; a person detached from the word is illiterate. The very essence of prayer is in a blending of the two.

To be engaged in prayer and to be away from prayer are two different states of living and thinking. In the depth of the soul there is a distance between the two. The course of consciousness which a person pursues, the way of thinking by which he lives most of the time, are remote from the course and way of thinking peculiar to prayer. To be able to pray one must alter the course of consciousness, one must go through moments of disengagement one must adjust oneself to another way and another atmosphere of thinking.

How does the change come to pass? How does a person who is away from prayer become a person who is engaged in prayer? Those who have dealt with the problem derive the act of prayer from certain mental, emotional or social impulses or conditions.¹ It is said, for example, that great joy or deep sorrow is the source of prayer. Yet, in stressing the psychological impulse or the sociological factor, we often lose sight of the fact that everyday prayer springs to a much greater degree from another source. It is in prayer itself that one becomes a praying man, and seldom before. One becomes a praying man by means of the word. ...

Words Speak

We shall never be able to understand that the spirit is revealed in the form of words, unless we discover the vital truth that speech has power, that words are commitments.

...

Words of prayer do not fade. They remain alive in the holy dimension. Words of prayer are commitments. We stand for what we utter. Prayer is the opposite of pretentiousness.

...

A word is a focus, a point at which meanings meet and from which meanings seem to proceed. In prayer, as in poetry, we turn to the words, not to use them as signs for things, but to see the things in the light of the words. In daily speech, it is usually we who speak words, but the words are silent. In poetry, in prayer, the words speak. ...

An Island in This World

Prayer, as said above, is an event that comes to pass between the soul of man and the word. It is from this point of view, that we have to distinguish between two main types of prayer: prayer as *an act of expression* and prayer as *an act of empathy*.

The first type comes to pass when we feel the urge to set forth before God a personal concern. Here the concern, and even the mood and the desire to pray, come first; the word follows. It is the

¹ See above: *1. The Inner World, "An Invitation to God"*.

urge to pray that leads to the act of praying.

... The more common type of prayer is *an act of empathy*. There need be no prayerful mood in us when we begin to pray. It is through our reading and feeling the words of the prayers, through the imaginative projection of our consciousness into the meaning of the words, and through empathy or the ideas with which the words are pregnant, that this type of prayer comes to pass. Here the word comes first, the feeling follows.

...

The concepts which indicate the divine surpass the bounds of human consciousness. The words which tell of it exceed the power of the soul, and, over and above that, they demand an intensity of dedication which is rarely present. To name Him is a risk, a forcing of the consciousness beyond itself. To refer to Him, means almost to get outside oneself. Every praying person knows how serious an act the utterance of His name is, for the word is not a tool but a reflection of the object which it designates. ...

In the prayer of expression we often arrive at thoughts that lie beyond our power of expression. In the prayer of empathy we often arrive at words that lie beyond our power of empathy. It is in such tensions that our worship gains in strength and our knowledge in intuitive depth.

Genuine prayer is an event in which man surpasses himself. Man hardly comprehends what is coming to pass. Its beginning lies on this side of the word, but the end lies beyond all words. What is happening is not always brought about by the power of man. At times all we do is to utter a word with all our heart, yet it is as if we lifted up a whole world. ...

We do not turn the light of prayer on and off at will, as we control sober speculation; we are seized by the overwhelming spell of its grandeur. It is amazement, not understanding; awe, not reasoning; a challenge, a sweep of emotion, the tide of the spirit, a claim on our wills by the living will of God.

The service of prayer, the worship of the heart, fulfills itself not in the employment of words as a human expression but in the celebration of words as a holy reality. ...

An Answer of the Whole Person

... The truth is that the absolute contrast between expression and empathy exists only in abstraction. In human experience they are intimately intertwined; the one cannot happen without the other. An act of empathy is involved in genuine expression, and profound empathy generates expression.

...

Still, there is a tension between our insistence that prayer is an outburst of the heart, spontaneity, and the insistence that prayer must be bound to a fixed liturgy, largely confined to a particular text, to some definite words or means of expression. An authority such as Bahya Ibn Paquda reminds us: "It is meet, my brother, that thou shouldst know that our object in prayer is but the consummation of the soul's longing for God and its humiliation before Him, coupled with its exaltation of the Creator, its bestowal of praise and gratitude upon His name, and its casting of all its burdens upon Him." However, since it is difficult for the soul to recall all the thoughts that one

ought to have in an act of worship, “and also because the mind is unstable, owing to the swiftness with which fancies pass through it ... our wise men, peace be unto them, composed the Order of Prayers.”² With these remarks we must concur.

...

Those who plead for the primacy of the prayer of expression over the prayer of empathy ought to remember that the ability to express what is hidden in the heart is a rare gift, and cannot be counted upon by all men. What, as a rule, makes it possible for us to pray is our ability to affiliate our own minds with the pattern of fixed texts, to unlock our hearts to the words, and to surrender to their meanings. The words stand before us as living entities full of spiritual power, of a power which often surpasses the grasp of our minds. The words are often the givers, and we the recipients. They inspire our minds and awaken our hearts.

...

On the other hand, one may ask: Why should we follow the order of the liturgy? Should we not say, one ought to pray when he is ready to pray? The time to pray is all the time. There is always an opportunity to disclose the holy, but when we fail to seize it, there are definite moments in the liturgical order of the day, there are words in the liturgical order of our speech to remind us. These words are like mountain peaks pointing to the unfathomable. Ascending their trails we arrive at prayer.³

Prayer Is a Pilgrimage

There is danger in the prayer of empathy, the danger of relying on the word, of depending upon the text, of forgetting that the word is a challenge to the soul rather than a substitute for the outburst of the heart. Even in prayer of empathy the word is, at best, the inspirer, not the source. The source is the soul. Prayer as a way of speaking is a way that leads nowhere. The text must never be more important than *kavanah*, than inner devotion. The life of prayer depends not so much upon loyalty to custom as upon inner participation; not so much upon the length as upon the depth of the service. ...

Prayer Begins Where Expression Ends

Prayer, as we shall see, is dominated by a polarity of regularity and spontaneity, of the stillness of a fixed text (*keva*) and of the motivity of inner devotion (*kavanah*), of empathy and self-expression. ...

In a sense, prayer begins where expression ends. The words that reach our lips are often but waves of an overflowing stream touching the shore. We often seek and miss, struggle and fail to adjust our unique feelings to the patterns of texts. The soul can only intimate its persistent striving, the riddle of its unhappiness, the strain of living twixt hope and fear. ...

In no other act does man experience so often the disparity between the desire for expression and the means of expression as in prayer. The inadequacy of the means at our disposal appears so tangible, so tragic, that one feels it a grace to be able to give oneself up to music, to a tone, to a song, to a chant. The wave of a song carries the soul to heights which utterable meanings can

² Bahya Ibn Paquda, *The Duties of the Heart*, ed. by Moses Haymson, Vol. IV, p. 72.

³ See later: 4. *Continuity Is the Way*, “God’s Desire That I Worship”.

never reach. Such abandonment is no escape nor an act of being unfaithful to the mind. For the world of unutterable meanings is the nursery of the soul, the cradle of all our ideas. It is not an escape but a return to one's origins.

What the word can no longer yield, man achieves through the fullness of his powerlessness. The deeper the need in which one is placed through this powerlessness, the more does man reveal himself in his essence, and himself becomes expression. Prayer is more than communication, and man is more than the word. ...

“To Thee Silence Is Praise”

The sense for the power of words and the sense for the impotence of human expression are equally characteristic of the religious consciousness. ... This is the most important guidance:

*Commune with your hearts ...
and be still.*

Psalms 4:5

“The highest form of worship is that of silence and hope.”⁴ “The language of the heart is the main thing; the spoken word serves merely as an interpreter between the heart and the listener.”⁵ “The preparations of the heart are man's, but the expression (or answer) of the tongue is from the Lord” (Proverbs 16:1). “*For there is a form of knowledge that precedes the process of expression* (compare Psalms 139:4), and it is God who understands it.”⁶

...

In a sense, our liturgy is a higher form of silence. It is pervaded by an awed sense of the grandeur of God which resists description and surpasses all expression. The individual is silent. He does not bring forth his own words. His saying the consecrated words is in essence an act of listening to what they convey. *The spirit of Israel speaks, the self is silent.*

Twofold is the meaning of silence. One, the abstinence from speech, the absence of sound. Two, inner silence, the absence of self-concern, stillness. One may articulate words in his voice and yet be inwardly silent. One may abstain from uttering any sound and yet be overbearing.

Both are inadequate: our speech as well as our silence. Yet there is a level that goes beyond both: the level of song. “There are three ways in which a man expresses his deep sorrow: the man on the lowest level cries; the man on the second level is silent; the man on the highest level knows how to turn his sorrow into song.”⁷ True prayer is a song.

Prayer and the Community

We have stressed the fact that prayer is an event that begins in the individual soul. We have not dwelled upon how much our ability to pray depends upon our being a part of a community of prayer.

It is not safe to pray alone. Tradition insists that we pray with, and as a part of, the community;

⁴ Ibn Gabirol, *The Choice of Pearls*, ed. Ascher, 66.

⁵ Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Psalms*, 4:5.

⁶ Ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Proverbs*, 16:1.

⁷ *Seah Sarfe Kodesh*, vol. 2, p. 92, §318.

that public worship is preferable to private worship. Here we are faced with an aspect of the *polarity of prayer*. There is a permanent union between individual worship and community worship, each of which depends for its existence upon the other. To ignore their *spiritual symbiosis* will prove fatal to both.

How can we forget that our ability to pray we owe to the community and to tradition? We have learned how to pray by listening to the voice of prayer, by having been a part of a community of men standing before God. We are often carried toward prayer by the reader: when we hear how he asks questions, how he implores, cries, humbles himself, sings.

Those who cherish genuine prayer, yet feel driven away from the houses of worship because of the sterility of public worship today, seem to believe that private prayer is the only way. Yet, the truth is that private prayer will not survive unless it is inspired by public prayer. The way of the recluse, the exclusive concern with personal salvation, piety in isolation from the community is an act of impiety.

Judaism is not only the adherence to particular doctrines and observances, but primarily living in the spiritual order of the Jewish people, the living *in* the Jews of the past and *with* the Jews of the present. Judaism is not only a certain quality in the souls of the individuals, but primarily the existence of the community of Israel. It is not a doctrine, an idea, a faith, but the covenant between God and the people. Our share in holiness we acquire by living in the Jewish community. What we do as individuals is a trivial episode; what we attain as Israel causes it to become a part of eternity.

...

And yet — this we must never forget — prayer is primarily an event in the individual souls, an act of emanation, not only an act of participation. Even the worth of public worship depends upon the depth of private worship, of the private worship of those who worship together. We are taught that the fate of all mankind depends upon the conduct of one single individual, namely you.⁸ This undoubtedly applies to what goes on in the houses of worship.

The tragedy is that public worship in our time seems to have gone in a direction where genuine prayer is hardly encouraged. Let us attempt to offer an analysis of the contemporary situation.

3. Spontaneity Is the Goal

Praying by Proxy

Services are conducted with dignity and precision. The rendition of the liturgy is smooth. Everything is present: decorum, voice, ceremony. But one thing is missing: *Life*. One knows in advance what will ensue. There will be no surprise, no adventure of the soul; there will be no sudden outburst of devotion. Nothing is going to happen to the soul. ...

Has the temple become the graveyard where prayer is buried? ... Of course, people still attend “services” — but what does this attendance frequently mean to them? Outpouring

⁸ *Kiddushin*, 40b.

of the soul? Worship? Prayer, temple attendance has become a service of the community rather than service of God. ...

Spiritual Absenteeism

There is another privation: the loss of *grace*. Our services have so little charm, so little grace. What is grace? The presence of the soul. A person has grace when the throbbing of his heart is audible in his voice; when the longings of his soul animate his face. ...

It is the *intonation* that lends grace to what we say. But when we pray, the words faint on our lips. Our words have no tone, no strength, no personal dimension, as if we did not mean what we said ... Of course, they are offered plenty of responsive reading, but there is little responsiveness to what they read. ...

Assembled in the synagogue everything is there — the body, the benches, the books. But one thing is absent: soul. It is as if we all suffered from *spiritual absenteeism*. In good prayer, words become one with the soul. Yet in our synagogues, people who are otherwise sensitive, vibrant, arresting, sit there aloof, listless, lazy. *The dead praise not the Lord* (Psalms 115:17). Those who are spiritually dull cannot praise God.

That we sensed that this is a problem is evidenced by the many valiant but futile attempts to deal with it. The problem, namely, of how to increase synagogue attendance. A variety of suggestions have been made, e.g., to bring the liturgy up to date by composing shorter and better prayers; to invite distinguished speakers, radio-commentators and columnists, to arrange congregational forums, panels and symposia; to celebrate annual projects such as “Jewish Culture Sabbath,” “Jewish War Veterans Sabbath,” “Boy Scouts Sabbath,” “Interfaith Sabbath” (why not a “*Sabbath Sabbath*?”); to install stained glass windows; to place gold, silver or blue pledge-cards on the seats on which people would pledge regular attendance; to remind people of their birthday dates. Well-intentioned as these suggestions may be, they do not deal with the core of the issue. *Spiritual problems* cannot be solved by *administrative techniques*.

The problem is not how to fill the buildings but how to inspire the hearts. And this is a problem to which techniques of commercial psychology can hardly be applied. The problem is not one of *synagogue attendance* but one of *spiritual attendance*. The problem is not *how to attract bodies to enter the space of a temple* but *how to inspire souls to enter an hour of spiritual concentration* in the presence of God. The problem is *time*, not *space*.⁹

Prayer is an extremely intricate phenomenon. Numerous attempts have been made to define and to explain it. I will briefly mention four of the prevalent doctrines.

⁹ See A. J. Heschel, *The Sabbath, Its Meaning to Modern Man*, New York, 1951, p. 8.

(1) The Doctrine of Agnosticism

The doctrine of Agnosticism claims that prayer is rooted in superstition. It is “one of humanity’s greatest mistakes,” “a desperate effort of bewildered creatures to come to terms with surrounding mystery.” Thus, prayer is a fraud. ...

There are some people who believe that the only way to revitalize the synagogue is to minimize the importance of prayer and to convert the synagogue into a social center.¹⁰ Let us face the situation. This is the law of life. Just as man cannot live without a soul, religion cannot survive without God. Our soul withers without prayer. A synagogue in which men no longer aspire to prayer is not a compromise but a defeat; a perversion, not a concession. To pray with *kavanah* (inner devotion) may be difficult; to pray without it is ludicrous.

(2) The Doctrine of Religious Behaviorism

There are people who seem to believe that religious deeds can be performed in a spiritual wasteland, in the absence of the soul, with a heart hermetically sealed; that external action is the essential mode of worship, pedantry the same as piety; as if all that mattered is how men behaved in physical terms; as if religion were not concerned with the inner life.¹¹

...

As a personal attitude religious behaviorism usually reflects a widely held theology in which the supreme article of faith is *respect for tradition*. People are urged to observe the rituals or to attend services out of deference to what has come down to us from our ancestors. ...

Wise, important, essential and pedagogically useful as the principle “respect for tradition” is, it is grotesque and self-defeating to make of it the supreme article of faith.

...

(3) The Doctrine of Prayer as a Social Act

There is another definition which is being perpetuated all over the country in sermons, synagogue bulletins and books. “*Prayer is the identification of the worshiper with the people of Israel,*” or “the occasion for immersing ourselves in the living reality” of our people. In inviting people to join a synagogue, the idea is advanced that “The synagogue is the instrument through which the Jew is identified with his people. The sense of identification is achieved only through common worship.” ...

“An act of identification with the people” is, phenomenologically speaking, the definition of a political act. But is a political phenomenon the same as worship? Moreover, is the act of identification with the Jewish people in itself an act that constitutes the essence of worship? Who is our model: Elijah who disassociated himself from the congregations of

¹⁰ See *Shabbath*, 31b.

¹¹ On the radical importance of doing, see p. 110.

his people, or the prophets of the Baal who led and identified themselves with their people? The prophets of Israel were not eager to be in agreement with popular sentiments. Spiritually important, essential, and sacred as the identification with the people Israel is, we must not forget that what lends spiritual importance and sanctity to that identification is Israel's unique association with the will of God. It is this association that raises our attachment to the people Israel above the level of mere nationalism.

The doctrine of prayer as a social act is the product of what may be called "*the sociological fallacy*," according to which the individual has no reality except as a carrier of ideas and attitudes that are derived from group existence. Applied to Jewish faith, it is a total misunderstanding of the nature of Jewish faith to overemphasize the social or communal aspect. It is true that a Jew never worships as an isolated individual but *as a part of the Community of Israel*. Yet it is within the heart of every individual that prayer takes place. It is a personal duty, and an intimate act which cannot be delegated to either the cantor or to the whole community. We pray with all of Israel, and every one of us by himself. Contrary to sociological theories, individual prayer preceded collective prayer in the history of religion. ...

(4) The Doctrine of Religious Solipsism

The doctrine maintains that the individual self of the worshiper is the whole sphere of prayer-life. The assumption is that God is an idea, a process, a source, a fountain, a spring, a power. But one cannot worship an idea; one cannot address his prayers to a fountain of values; one cannot pray to "whom it may concern. To whom, then, do we direct our prayers? Yes, there is an answer. As a recent writer put it: We address "prayers to the good within ourselves."¹²

I do not wish to minimize the fact that we all suffer from an ego-centric predicament. Our soul tends to confine itself to its own ideas, interests, and emotions. But why should we raise the ego-centric affliction to the status of a virtue? It is precisely the function of prayer to overcome that predicament, to see the world in a different setting. The self is not the hub but the spoke of the revolving wheel. It is precisely the function of prayer to shift the center of living from self-consciousness to self-surrender.¹³

Religious solipsism claims that we must continue to recite our prayers, for prayer is a useful activity. The ideas may be false; it is absurd to believe that God "hearkens to prayers and supplications," but we should say all this because it is good for one's health. Is it really good for one's health? How could intellectual dishonesty be good for the soul?

¹² A discussion of this view, which is so popular today, is found in I. Segond, *La prière, étude de psychologie religieuse*, Paris, 1911, p. 52. It is a definition of prayer that fits into pantheism. If the deity is equated with the universe, and we ourselves are a part of the universe or the deity, then in praying to the deity, we are in essence praying to ourselves.

¹³ See above, pp. 7, 15.

The Separation of Church and God

... *The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God.* One cannot pray unless he has faith in his own ability to accost the infinite, merciful, eternal God.

Moreover, we must not overlook one of the profound principles of Judaism. There is something which is far greater than my desire to pray, namely, God's desire that I pray. There is something which is far greater than my will to believe, namely, God's will that I believe. ...

The true source of prayer, we said above, is not an emotion but an insight. It is the insight into the mystery of reality, *the sense of the ineffable*, that enables us to pray. As long as we refuse to take notice of what is beyond our sight, beyond our reason; as long as we are blind to the mystery of being, the way to prayer is closed to us. If the rise of the sun is but a daily routine of nature, there is no reason to say, *In mercy Thou givest light to the earth and to those who dwell on it . . . every day constantly.* If bread is nothing but flour moistened, kneaded, baked and then brought forth from the oven, it is meaningless to say, *Blessed art Thou... who bringest forth bread from the earth.*

The way to prayer leads through *acts of wonder* and *radical amazement*. The illusion of total intelligibility, the indifference to the mystery that is everywhere, the foolishness of ultimate self-reliance are serious obstacles on the way. It is in moments of our being faced with the mystery of living and dying, of knowing and not-knowing, of love and the inability of love — that we pray, that *we address ourselves to Him who is beyond the mystery.*

...

Praise is our first response. Aflame with inability to say what His presence means, we can only sing, we can only utter words of adoration. ...

The Primacy of Inwardness

... Prayer is not for the sake of something else. *We pray in order to pray.* It is the queen of all commandments. No religious act is performed in which prayer is not present. No other *mitzvah* (commandment; a sacred act) enters our lives as frequently, as steadily, as the majesty of prayer.

The first tractate of the Talmud, the first section of Maimonides' Code as well as Caro's code, deal with prayer. We are told that "prayer is greater than good deeds," "more precious than sacrifices."¹⁴ To Rabbenu Bahya ben Asher, the spiritual sphere that prayer can reach is higher than the sphere out of which inspiration of the prophets flows.¹⁵

The philosophy of Jewish living is essentially a philosophy of worship. For what is observance, if not a form of worshipping God?

¹⁴ *Berachoth* 32a.

¹⁵ Rabbi Bahya ben Asher, *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, on Deuteronomy 11:12.

What is a *mitzvah*, a sacred act? *A Prayer in the form of a deed. ...*

Prayer Is Sacrifice

Prayer is more than meditation, and reading the prayers involves more than reproducing vocally, while following their symbols with the eyes, the words of the liturgy. A third-century scholar avers that it is improper to call upon the person who acts as the reader of prayers for the congregation by saying, *Come and pray*; we must rather use the words, *Come, karev*. Since the Hebrew word *karev* has four meanings, the invitation extended to him signifies the four tasks which a reader has to fulfill. *Karev* means

- *offer our sacrifices!*
- *satisfy our needs!*
- *wage our battles!*
- *bring us close to Him!*¹⁶

The statement that since the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, prayer has taken the place of sacrifice, does not imply that sacrifice was abolished when the sacrificial cult went out of existence. Prayer is not a substitute for sacrifice. Prayer *is* sacrifice. What has changed is the substance of sacrifice: the self took the place of the thing. The spirit is the same. ...

During the act of prayer, one must “place himself among those who are ready to sacrifice themselves for the sanctification of God’s Name. ...

To the saints, prayer is a hazard, a venture full of peril. Every person who prays is a priest at the greatest of all temples. The whole universe is the temple. With good prayer he may purify it, with improper prayer he may contaminate it. With good prayer he may “build worlds,” with improper prayer he may “destroy worlds.” According to Rabbi Ami, a man’s prayer is answered only if he stakes his very life on it.¹⁷ “It is a miracle that a man survives the hour of worship,” the Baal Shem said. Before every morning prayer Rabbi Uri of Strelisk would take leave of his household, telling them what should be done with his manuscripts if he should pass away while praying.

The readiness to make the supreme sacrifice for the sake of His holy name, for the sake of the truth that *God is One*, has long been the essence of our devotion in proclaiming, *Hear, O Israel. ...*

Spiritual Delicacy

My intention is not to offer blueprints, to prescribe new rules — except one: Prayer must have life. It must not be a drudgery, something done in a rut, something to get over with.

¹⁶ *Jerushalmi Berachoth* IV, 4, 8b; and Jacob Levy, *Neuhebraeisches und Chaldaeisches Woerterbuch*, Vol. IV, p. 368b.

¹⁷ *Taanith* 8a.

It must not be fiction, it must not be flattened to a ceremony, to an act of mere respect for tradition. ...

An Ontological Necessity

The problem is not how to revitalize prayer; the problem is how to revitalize ourselves. Let us begin to cultivate those thoughts and virtues without which our worship becomes, of necessity, a prayer for the dead — for ideas which are dead to our hearts.

We must not surrender to the power of platitudes. If our rational methods are deficient and too weak to plumb the depth of faith, let us go into stillness and wait for the age in which reason will learn to appreciate the spirit rather than accept standardized notions that stifle the mind and stultify the soul. ... There was a time when God became so distant that we were almost ready to deny Him, had psychologists or sociologists not been willing to permit us to believe in Him. And how grateful some of us were when told *ex cathedra* that prayer is not totally irrelevant because it does satisfy an emotional need.

To Judaism the purpose of prayer is not to satisfy an emotional need. Prayer is not a need but *an ontological necessity*, an act that constitutes the very essence of man.¹⁸ He who has never prayed is not fully human. Ontology, not psychology or sociology, explains prayer.

...

In our liturgy we go beyond a mere hope; every seventh day we proclaim as a fact: *The soul of everything that lives blesses Thy name.*¹⁹ ...

Whose ear has ever heard how all trees sing to God? Has our reason ever thought of calling upon the sun to praise the Lord? And yet, what the ear fails to perceive, what reason fails to conceive, our prayer makes clear to our souls. It is a higher truth, to be grasped by the spirit:

All Thy works praise Thee

Psalms 145:10

We are not alone in our acts of praise. Wherever there is life, there is silent worship. The world is always on the verge of becoming one in adoration. It is man who is the cantor of the universe, and in whose life the secret of cosmic prayer is disclosed.

...

What is our liturgy as a whole trying to express if not the basic realities and attitudes of Jewish faith? To worship is to experience, not only to accept these realities and attitudes. The liturgy is our creed in the form of *a spiritual pilgrimage*. We do not confess our belief in God; we adore Him. We do not proclaim our belief in revelation; we utter our gratitude for it. We do not formulate the election of Israel; we sing it. Thus our liturgy is no mere memorial to the past; it is an act of participating in Israel's bearing witness to the unity, uniqueness, love and judgment of God. It is an act of joy.

¹⁸ Rabbi Jehuda Loew ben Besalel (Maharal) of Prague (died 1609), *Netivoth Olam*, Haavodah.

¹⁹ The usual translation "shall bless" totally misses the meaning of the passage.

...

The text of the prayer book presents difficulties to many people. But the crisis of prayer is not a problem of the text. It is a problem of the soul. The *Siddur* must not be used as a scapegoat. A revision of the prayer book will not solve the crisis of prayer. What we need is a revision of the soul, a new heart rather than a new text. Textual emendations will not save the spirit of prayer. Nothing less than a spiritual revolution will save prayer from oblivion. ...

Thirty Centuries of Experience

The rabbi's role in the sacred hour of worship goes far beyond that of maintaining order and decorum. His unique task is to be a source of inspiration, to endow others with a sense of *kavanah*. And as we have said, *kavanah* is more than a touch of emotion. *Kavanah* is insight, appreciation. To acquire such insight, to deepen such appreciation, is something *we must learn* all the days of our lives. It is something *we must live* all the days of our lives. Such insight, such appreciation, we must convey to others. It may be difficult to convey to others *what we think*, but it is not difficult to convey to others *what we live*. Our task is to echo and to reflect the light and spirit of prayer.

What I plead for is the creation of a prayer atmosphere. Such an atmosphere is not created by ceremonies, gimmicks or speeches, but by the example of prayer, by a person who prays. You create that atmosphere not around you but within you. ...

Kavanah requires preparation. Miracles may happen, but one must not rely on miracles. The spirit of prayer is frequently decided during the hour which precedes the time of prayer. Negatively, one is not ready to engage in certain activities, or even in light talk before he prays. And positively one must learn to perform a degree of inner purification before venturing to address the King of kings. According to Maimonides, "One must free his heart from all other thoughts and regard himself as standing in the presence of the *Shechinah*. Therefore, before engaging in prayer, the worshiper ought to go aside a little in order to bring himself into a devotional frame of mind, and then he must pray quietly and with feeling, not like one who carries a weight and throws it away and goes farther."²⁰ ...

The Issue of Prayer Is Not Prayer

To repeat, the issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God. ...

We have committed ourselves to Jewish experience, let us not distort it. We are not ready to emend the text and begin the silent prayer" by saying, "Blessed be It, the Supreme Concept, the God of Spinoza, Dewey and Alexander." Indeed, the term God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" is semantically different from a term such as "the God of truth, goodness and beauty." Abraham, Isaac and Jacob do not signify ideas, principles or abstract values. Nor do they stand for teachers or thinkers, and the term is not to be

²⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, Tefillah, 4, 16.

understood like that of “the God of Spinoza, Dewey and Alexander.” The categories of the Bible are not principles to be comprehended but events to be continued. The life of him who joins the covenant of Abraham continues the life of Abraham. Abraham endures for ever. We *are* Abraham, Isaac, Jacob.

...

Genuine prayer does not flow out of concepts. It comes out of the awareness of the mystery of God rather than out of information about Him.

...

There is no one who has no theology. It is the false theologies silencing God that block and hamper us in our response to Him. ...

Be Afraid, and Pray

Those who honestly search, those who yearn and fail, we did not presume to judge. Let them pray to be able to pray, and if they do not succeed, if they have no tears to shed, let them yearn for tears, let them try to discover their heart and let them take strength from the certainty that this too is a high form of prayer.

A learned man lost all his sources of income and was looking for a way to earn a living. The members of his community, who admired him for his learning and piety, suggested to him to serve as their cantor on the Days of Awe. But he considered himself unworthy of serving as the messenger of the community, as the one who should bring the prayers of his fellow-men to the Almighty. He went to his master the Rabbi of Husiatin and told him of his sad plight, of the invitation to serve as a cantor on the Days of Awe, and of his being afraid to accept it and to pray for his congregation.

“Be afraid, and pray,” was the answer of the rabbi.²¹

²¹ A. J. Heschel, *Man Is Not Alone*, p. 256.

How Can Reconstructionists Pray?, Jacob Staub

If you don't believe in a "traditional" God, why attend services?,

(JRF Quarterly – *Reconstructionism Today*; Spring 1996)

Reconstructionists are not atheists. The founder of Reconstructionism, Rabbi Mordecai M. Kaplan, was falsely accused of atheism during his lifetime and has been so labeled since his death. Those accusations are made by people who think that either you believe in a God who governs the details of our lives, rewarding and punishing us, orchestrating the things that - happen or you don't believe in God at all.

Most Reconstructionists reject that attempt to define our beliefs, because it does not correspond with our experience. On good days, my life is permeated with God's presence. I open my eyes in the morning and am in awe of the light of the morning sun. Kissing my wife and children goodbye, I am overcome with the way our very imperfect family generates love and joy among us. Solving a difficult challenge on the job, I take a breath and notice the constructive, healing processes I have harnessed.

I don't believe that God decided to cause the sun to rise this morning. I don't believe God watches over my children and makes them mature. I don't believe God solves my work problems. But I do believe I live in a world that God underlies and suffuses. I do believe that I do not generate my virtuous deeds and insights independently, but rather am connected to a greater Source of strength and blessing with whom I am always trying to align. I believe some things are right and some things are wrong, and I believe that when you do the wrong thing you are opposing the divine will and that the world is so constructed that you will suffer for it internally.

Not all Reconstructionists share each of these specific beliefs. What we do share is a conviction that a) the words of the Torah, and consequently the *mitzvot* (including those about prayer) were not literally spoken and commanded by God at Sinai, and b) that nevertheless our inherited traditions, including the *siddur* (prayer book), are an invaluable treasure that can help us to unfold the deeper meanings of our lives and our relationship to God.

In other words, if I had brought a tape recorder to Mount Sinai, I believe there would have been no audible divine voice to record; only the human side of the conversation was recordable. But I believe that God *was* at Sinai, encountered by Moses, so that even though the words of the Torah are Moses human interpretation of God's will, they are inspired by that encounter and contain divine insight.

And so with every divine-human encounter up to the present day: What we hear and understand of God is necessarily conditioned by who we are, by where and when we live, by our culture's values, by our individual propensities. We are the flawed filters through

which the word of God is conveyed. Therefore, we Reconstructionists don't believe that everything that preceding generations said about God and about what God wants is true. But we do believe in a God who is beyond all of the historically conditioned human portraits of God. And we seek to express our intuitions of God in ways that both correspond to the teachings we inherit and that are compelling in the cultural idiom of our day.

There are three primary ways that Jews have pictured God at work in our lives - as the God of Creation, the God of Revelation, and the God of Redemption. Each of these can still serve us well as we seek to give words to our encounters with God.

Creation

God is the Source of the universe. God is therefore met in the laws and cycles of nature, in the expanse of the galaxies, in the miracle of life. Even as scientists explore quarks and black holes, new facets of DNA and new evidence about evolution, we are aware that we will never comprehend it all. But when we catch the breeze on a sunny spring day or watch a toddler take her first step, we get a glimpse of the ineffable oneness underlying it all.

Revelation

God is the Source of our spiritual and moral passion. The human species may or may not be the crown of creation, but there is definitely a connection between our minds and souls and the divinely infused world out there. It is as if God's word overflows perpetually, embedded in the color of the sky and the behavior of groups, in test tubes and mathematical formulas, waiting for us to open to its message and interpret it for our lives and time. The more open we are, the more we hear.

Redemption

God is the source of all our tendencies to help and love and cooperate. It is easy enough for each of us to remain self-centered, not to care about others, to regard others as Other and therefore not worthy of our kindness. Human history documents the prevalence of these tendencies. But there is a divine spark in each of us that can be nurtured, a source of goodness and caring that can move us to act on principle, to do what is right even if it is not in our own best interest in the short term. It enables us to envision a redeemed world so that we can work towards that vision.

The kabbalists seized and expanded upon the rabbinic assertion that we are partners with God in the work of creation. They pictured this world as having been created imperfect by God, who then needs us to release the divine sparks hidden within it.

Here, then, is a non-exhaustive list of why a Reconstructionist Jew, who does not believe that God hears our prayers or answers our petitions, might choose to pray:

Spiritual Discipline

Most of us go through the day without experiencing God's presence. A spiritual sense is a faculty that must be developed and maintained. Focusing regularly on our sacred encounters helps us to notice them as they occur.

Meditation

Most of us live at a very rapid pace. We welcome the opportunity to slow down to remember what has deeper meaning beyond our daily distractions.

Group Connection

If we are not careful, it is pretty easy to become isolated. Even if we interact frequently with others, our daily lives rarely afford many opportunities to let our guards down and express what is really important to us. It is a real treat to be connected to a group, all of whom are seeking together.

Celebration

For many of us, group singing transports us beyond ourselves. I may be awash in gratitude for a life-cycle passage, or for the blossoming of flowers in my yard, but without my *minyan* (prayer quorum), where could I sing out?

Group Support

Life is unfortunately filled with disappointment, illness, tragedy. Social scientists now tell us what we already knew: that recovery from family discord, depression, and even physical illness is enhanced when we experience the support of a caring group. You therefore might believe that praying for a sick person is efficacious even if you don't believe that God intercedes supernaturally. Our prayers have power.

Rededication to Principles

Most of us are raised to think that we have control of our lives, and that therefore we are responsible for what happens to us good and bad. In truth, we have far less control than we think, and it is good to acknowledge our vulnerability. Prayer allows us to ask for help, to admit that we need help, that we are frightened or overwhelmed or desperate. Removing our defenses before God can move us to the honest self-awareness we require to get past our personal obstacles.

The rabbis engaged in interesting discussions about the relationship in prayer between *kevah* (fixed prayers, the words of which are provided in the *siddur*) and *kavanah* (spontaneous reflections by the one praying). They understood that mindless recitation of words written by others was not prayer. But they also understood that without a prepared format to induce us to pray, most of us would rarely achieve a prayerful state.

The traditional prayers in the *siddur* are thus intended as a format to assist us in getting in touch with our own personal prayers. In my own experience, it was the regular recitation of the *Modim* (thanks) section of the *Amidah* (standing prayer) that first enabled me, after six months, to become regularly connected with my feelings of thankfulness. I then went

on to other parts of the fixed service until the entire fixed service has become a set of mnemonics that jump-start me in an ever-new variety of meditations.

But isn't the traditional service, even in the new Reconstructionist *siddur*, laden with anthropomorphic supernatural language that presents a challenge to our intellectual integrity and thus an obstacle to genuine prayer? The answer for many people is yes - unless and until we reinterpret the meaning of images so often that we reach a point at which we read them with new meanings without need to reinterpret consciously any longer. Here are two illustrations:

Modim

In every *Amidah*, we *davven* the *Modim* paragraph, a prayer of thanksgiving in which we say:

We acknowledge you, declare your praise, and thank you
... for your miracles that greet us every day, and for your
wonders and good things that are with us every hour.

Now, the words *nisseha* (your miracles) and *nifla'oteha* (your wonders) are terms that have traditionally been applied to God's splitting of the Sea of Reeds and God's enabling of the one flask of oil to burn for eight days in other words, to classical supernatural events in which we Reconstructionists do not literally believe.

Yet these traditional words can helpfully re-introduce a sense of awe, wonder, and thankfulness into our consciousness, a needed antidote to the modern tendency to reduce the wonders of nature and human development to their scientific causes, ignore their sacred dimension and thus impoverish our spirits.

Do you nevertheless remain resistant to using the word miracle? Consider, then, the interpretation of Rabbi Levi ben Gerson (Gersonides), a 14th-century Jewish philosopher who was as uncomfortable as we are with the notion that God intervenes supernaturally to perform miracles. Gersonides understood miracles as extraordinary events that violated no laws of nature but were sufficiently rare that most people are surprised by them. He believed it is the function of prophets, who have a heightened understanding of nature, to anticipate and point out these extraordinary events, and to use them to remind the rest of us of God's presence in the world.

Here, then, is a "traditional understanding" (over 600 years old, and published in traditional Bible commentaries) of miracles as natural events that evoke awe and wonder. A sunrise. Childbirth. Love. Insight. An unexpected recovery from illness. An unanticipated peace treaty. An overwhelming obstacle overcome. Miracles.

The Morning Blessings

Every *Shaharit* morning service begins with *Birhot Hashahar*, the Morning Blessings, in which we praise God for such things as "making the blind to see," "clothing the naked,"

"making the captive free," etc.

How can we honestly say that our non-supernatural God does these things? God doesn't cause blindness, and most blind people are never able to see. If the vision of a blind person is restored by surgery, thanking God for the work of the surgeon is a bit naive and saccharine.

In each of these cases, it is critically important to realize that our questions are not new in Jewish history. It is incorrect to imagine all of our ancestors as pious, simple peasants who thought they literally saw God's finger in every occurrence that impressed them. They knew that blind people don't see, that beggars in rags aren't provided with wardrobes, that captives often perish. And so we have a centuries-old treasury of interpretive traditions that give rich expression to the multiple meanings of these phrases.

There are many forms of blindness. We don't see because we fail to notice out of carelessness. Or because we are enraged. Or because we lack the insight that comes from maturity. Or because we are blinded by preconceptions or prejudice. Or because we had glaucoma or cataracts. Or because we lacked the right teachers and mentors. Or because cultural conceptions misled us. Seen in this way, all of life is a process of acquiring new and better sight, and God is the force within us and around us that helps us to grow in ever-new ways.

Each of these *berahot* (blessings) acknowledges an aspect of our experience in which it is possible to become frustrated, to lose hope, to get caught in a rut. The morning blessings are an invaluable tool to help us begin the new day by opening to new possibilities.

Each of us can be enriched in our own way by the experience of regular *davvening*. Praying allows us to center our focus, to look inward, to be elevated beyond our individual concerns, and the words and structures of the traditional service can be very helpful in all these regards.

The answer to our prayers comes not from a supernatural God but from our own transformed hearts.

The Path of Blessing, Marcia Prager

Embracing the Energy and Abundance of the Divine,

1998

The Spiritual Practice of Brakhot

The tradition of blessing is woven into a larger matrix of Jewish spiritual practice informing the whole of life. It is also set in the larger context of *kedusha*, sacredness or holiness. Twice in Torah our people hear the command: “Be *kadosh*”: “Be holy!” “Be sacred beings!” Our people’s entire spiritual endeavor — all of Torah, all the law, all the praise, all the songs, all the prayers, blessings, and sacrifices — can be seen as a response to that call: “Be sacred beings, be *kadosh*.”

Our quest is to discern what that call means. How can one be *kadosh*? We hear in Proverbs the words of King Solomon: “*B’khol d’rakhekha daeyhu*.” “In each of your ways, know God.” We wonder how we can accomplish this. Our ways are those of human beings living in the world. We wake up; we go to sleep; we drink; we wash; we work; we buy and sell; we play; we pray; we have relationships; we do laundry, take care of our children and our parents.... Know the source of holiness in ALL our ways? Bring *kedusha*, the sacred, into EVERY aspect of our lives? Is this not an impossible challenge?

If every aspect of our existence is an opportunity to experience God, how shall we live when we discover that God permeates all, from the galactic to the microscopic? How shall we respond — personally, as a society, as a species — when we begin to understand not only our lives but all existence as a sacred gift?

At times such *kedusha*, such a sense of the sacred, actually seems within our reach. We all have moments in which we are jolted out of our habitual anxiety, when we surrender control and let go of self-conscious judgments. In those moments we can just “be.” We can feel refreshingly open, clear, and complete. Our mental clutter and confusions fall away, and we remember with great joy our oneness with all that is. At such moments the whole universe dances inside us!

In Hebrew this gentle attunement is called *mochin d’gadlut* — literally, “big mind,” expanded consciousness-moments in which our hearts open to awe, wonder, and infinite possibility. In *mochin d’gadlut*, we are filled with God and every moment is a miracle unfolding.

We strive to hold on to this expansiveness of spirit. But it is difficult, and all too easily we slide back into the more limited spiritual condition of *mochin d’katnut*, “little mind,” constricted consciousness. Accustomed to layers of distress, disappointments, and boredom, we “get by.” We discover that we can avoid being hurt by diminishing our

capacity to feel.

As we gradually become numb to both joy and pain, our lives appear manageable. This is the condition described as *galut*, alienation and exile from God. When we look at small children, we see their sense of wonder, their openness to the miraculous. But we notice, as we grow habituated to the world and its daily pressures, that our own moments of ecstatic delight diminish. When we allow all the daily miracles to be passed by, our openness to the abundance of divine blessing withers. We realize we have traded away our own aliveness and we long to find our way back. How strongly we need to counteract those dulling life pressures.

And still more! In order to nourish *kedusha*, any spiritual endeavor not only must act as an antidote to the dulling circumstances of life and keep alive our three-year-old's sense of wonder, it must also actively develop our awareness and sensitivity and nurture a maturation of consciousness.

This is the path of blessing.

The Hebrew word for blessing is *brakha* (plural *brakhot*, or sometimes, more colloquially, *brakhas*). The Jewish practice of blessing derives from our tradition's desire to promote joy and appreciation, wonder and thankfulness, amazement and praise. A *brakha* is, we might say, a kind of "gratitude yoga" we can employ not only day to day but moment to moment. It is in itself not at all strenuous. It doesn't require a minyan, the quorum of ten worshippers; it doesn't require travel; it doesn't require that we have any accoutrements or a special mantra or that we become a yogi, an adept, a *tzaddik*, or a buddha. It merely asks us to engage in a moment of delayed gratification, using the respite as an opportunity for something else to occur.

Just as every seventh day we separate out Shabbos, a sabbath, in order to remove ourselves from the physical work of the world, dedicating time to the work of the soul, so in making a *brakha* we separate out time before we consume, use, or enjoy something of the world in order to create a space where something other than thoughtless appropriation can unfold. As we grow in the path of blessing, we open to a more expansive way of being. Through blessing, we uncover the infinitely abundant Presence of God in even the smallest action.

Jewish tradition teaches that the simple action of a *brakha* has a cosmic effect, for a *brakha* causes *shefa*, the "abundant flow" of God's love and goodness, to pour into the world. Like a hand on the faucet, each *brakha* turns on the tap.

How delicious it is to live in God's goodness. Too often we walk uncaring and unconscious through our jobs and lives, oblivious to the love that surrounds us and is us. When, however, we live in the abundant flow, we know ourselves to be loved and supported unconditionally. Only then do we become free both to receive and to give

fully.

Each acknowledgment of divine abundance cycles more blessing into the world. Thus all of life is enriched. Jewish consciousness carries a deep awareness that in order for the cycles to continue — whether those of an individual human life, community life, the seasons, or the universe — they need to be nourished. When we fail to cultivate a practice of appreciation as potent as our capacity to appropriate, we become despoilers, destroying both ourselves and the whole. When we use the world as if it belongs to us, we use it as we would a possession. The practice of blessing helps us see that consuming without returning the gift of our conscious awareness makes us in a way like thieves.

In the first book of the Talmud, *Brakhot*, a detailed record of early rabbinic teachings on blessing and prayer, one teacher unabashedly exclaims, “Anyone who derives pleasure from this world without a *brakha* is stealing from God!”

Another rabbi goes even further. “Each of us,” he says, “will be called to give account for the innocent delights of the world which our eyes saw, but which we didn’t let our mouths taste. However, one who delights in this world without a *brakha* is like a robber, because the *brakha* is what causes the continuation of the divine flow of *shefa* into the world. [All of creation is fashioned of sparks of divinity, and so] when the *brakha* is offered with directed awareness and purposeful intention, we avoid becoming destructive agents who selfishly hoard the sparks of divine energy in the food. By blessing the Source of the fruit/food.., we purify and release the sparks back into the life-sustaining flow of holiness.”

A *brakha* completes our energy-exchange with God. We are partners in a sacred cycle of giving and receiving in which we are not only “on the take.” When we offer our blessings, we raise up sparks of holiness, releasing the God-light housed in our world back to its Source. We receivers become givers, and the nurturing flow is sustained. When, on the other hand, we receive but fail to give, we become dogged, sick, and destructive. When we fail to praise, it is *we* who suffer. Without gratitude we become bored and depressed. This teaching, so fundamental to the Jewish practice of blessing, is movingly reflected as well in the poetry of Rumi, the Sufi poet: “Your depression is connected to your insolence and refusal to praise! Whoever feels himself walking on the path and refuses to praise — that man or woman steals from others every day — is a shoplifter!”

Imagine if at every moment we each embraced the world as the gift it is: An apple is a gift; the color pink is a gift; the blue sky is a gift; the scent of honeysuckle is a gift. Hidden in every experience is a gift, obligating us to heart-filled appreciation, to songs of gratitude. We are called not merely to notice casually now and then that something is special and nice but to sustain and deepen a profound and sustained gratitude. Indeed, the more we acknowledge our gratefulness, the more we temper our tendency to be users, despoilers, arrogant occupiers.

We are on our way to *kedusha*.

Blessing God

Because the word *brakha* is usually translated “blessing,” it can be valuable to begin our journey by investigating some of the questions this translation raises.

What does it mean to “bless”?

In common folk practices when someone sneezes, we may say “Bless you.” The expression has its roots in the hope that the words will ward off evil. To bless someone is to wish the person good fortune or to pray that Divine Providence will be favorable. But why, then, would someone offer a blessing to God? The notion seems absurd; God doesn’t need blessing and anyway, how could a human being bring God good fortune?

Blessing implies a transfer of intention, hopefulness, or awareness from a source to a recipient. If I bless you, I seek to move something of myself toward you. I want you to feel more confidence, more hopefulness, to become richer in some way. I am offering you something by blessing you. When we experience God as a Source of blessing, a Source of hope, confidence, and empowerment, we feel ourselves enriched. But the questions remain: Should we have to give hope and confidence to God? If not, what is it that I am moving toward God?

When we offer “blessing” to the Source of Blessing, we offer our gratitude not only for a particular gift but for the opportunity to experience our connection with the whole of life. Our *brakha* opens us to the *shefa* of divine goodness moving through us, filling us and flowing back to God. We partake of the world and are invited to experience God within everything.

This practice conveys a radical teaching: Neither the food we eat nor anything we find in the world is as inert as it may seem! Becoming aware of this takes us almost by surprise, yet at the same time seems more like a recollection of something we have always known. Discovering God’s aliveness in our world can feel as if a veil has been lifted and a joyous clarity returned. Ironically, our minds usually conceal this perception. We create mental constructs objectifying the world and obscuring its Godliness. On the path of blessing, we are reminded that the whole world is an expression of divine energy.

The sixteenth-century Kabbalist Rabbi Moshe Cordovero said, “The essence of divinity is found in every single thing — nothing but it exists. Since it causes every thing to be, no thing can live by anything else.... Do not say, ‘This is a stone and not God.’ God forbid! Rather, all existence is God and the stone is a thing pervaded by divinity.”

Rabbi Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl, gifted disciple of the Baal Shem Tov (the eighteenth-century mystical master who inspired the Eastern European Jewish spiritual

revival known as Hasidism) proclaimed: “God is garbed in everything! No place is empty of God!” Regarding the verse from Isaiah, “All the earth is filled with God’s Glorious-Presence,” he taught, “Glorious-Presence, that means garments.” That is, the whole earth is filled with God’s garments! All physicality is an enrobing of Divinity, each subatomic particle of Creation housing a spark of God.

The flow of divine energy into the world is sometimes compared to the flow of sap in a tree. The limbs of the tree are the pathways through which the life-giving God-energy courses. One word for “sap” in Hebrew, *s’raf* literally means “burning energy or “fire,” alluding to the sparks of sacred fire within everything.

Rabbi Isaac Luria, the great sixteenth-century master of Kabbalah — Jewish mystical teaching — urged us to see every physical object or being as sustained by the spark of holiness within it. When we eat, our bodies extract vitamins and minerals, but, he reminded us, it is not these that keep our souls alive! The human soul, he taught, recognizes and extracts the holy spark and from the spark is truly nourished.

When we walk the path of blessing, we begin to recognize the presence of these holy sparks in everything and everyone around us. Day by day the world becomes more alive, more magical, more miraculous! We partake of its gifts and with joy we lift up the holy sparks to fly freely back to God. With each *brakha* we also grow in awareness of our own miraculous soul-spark: God garbed in the essence of our own being.

The kabbalistic work *Pri Etz Hadar, Fruit of the Goodly Tree*, teaches us in these beautiful words how to focus our intention as we prepare to offer a *brakha*:

Holy One of Blessing
may it come to pass
that through the sacred power
of the fruit we are now eating and blessing,
(while we meditate on the secret of the flow of
Divine Energy upon which they depend),
that the Divine Flow of Blessing abundantly fill them.
May the flow never cease,
so that all will grow
from the beginning of the year until its end,
for abundance and blessing, for good life,
for fulfillment and peace.

Sending blessing back to the Source of Blessing is far more than just a “thank you card” of gratitude or praise. With our *brakha* we participate in the flow of divinity through the world. Now let us see precisely how the words of a Hebrew *brakha* assist us in cultivating those qualities of the soul that are requisite for this work.