

Darashti Kirvatekha: Ways in and out of Prayer

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“Life is a gift,” teaches Gil Baile, “and the task of life is to find a way to give it back.”

How *do* we give it back, this gift we call life? Many of us would say that we “give life back” through acts of generosity: our helping others, our contributions to making the world a more just and loving place. So what are we doing here right now? At this time, understood as the Holy of Holies of our year, a season ripe with urgency for change, what is it about prayer—which is our central practice during these days—that is so vital?

In the 21st century, especially in a progressive Jewish community like ours, we need to articulate where our prayer is leading us. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a teacher from whom a number of you have heard a lot in this past year, and upon whose teachings I will draw this evening, demanded this: “Prayer is private, a service of the heart; but let concern and compassion, born out of prayer, dominate public life.” In this spirit, I would like to offer that prayer is a means through which we both *discern how* to give life back, as well as nurture our inherent capabilities to give, to orient ourselves toward lives of generosity.

Prayer is an offering of the heart, linked in Jewish tradition with sacrifice. Both reflect a human impulse to reach for meaning and connection through offering, through giving up. This evening, I hope to convey some of the ways prayer has become for me the most consistently nourishing aspect of living a Jewish life. Speaking as someone who has traveled a winding road to the place in which I now stand, I’d like to reflect upon the role that prayer—as a practice—might have in our lives.

Growing up, I do not recall ever being taught that prayer could actually impact our lives; that it was not something we were simply required to memorize at synagogue. What I was not taught as a child, what I learn continually in my adult life, is that *prayer is real*, not simply because of what happens in the sanctuary, but more so because of what happens outside the sanctuary: in our lives, in our relationships, in our efforts to contribute to this world.

So what is it, in Jewish tradition, to pray? I am going to offer a few qualities, four in particular, that consistently resonate for me. These are qualities that I utilize in prayer, and also witness in my life as results of prayer. In other words, they represent both the seed and the fruit of the praying life. Just as we exercise to build strength and maintain health, so is prayer a method through which we tone “spiritual muscles.” So may these reflections serve as tools for use during these Days of Renewal, and beyond.

Attention (*Kavvanah*)

The first quality, the starting point for perhaps for any spiritual practice, is *attention*. Prayer asks us to pay attention. The most intimate name of God in our tradition, *Yud-Heh-Vav-Heh*, customarily spoken as “Adonai,” is born out of the verb “to be.” God, the tradition says, is All that Is, the Ever-present Be-ing. If we wish to awaken to God, then we must awaken to what is, within and around us.

Jacob awakes from his dream of the ladder, in which God promises to be with him, and calls out, “Surely, God is in this place, and I—I did not know it.” This place in which Jacob has that fateful dream—it could have been a special place. Or it could have been simply *a place*: a place like any other, with the potential to be holy, to be extraordinary if we pay enough attention. Surely God is in this place—this very place, at this very moment—and yet, we so often fail to recognize it.

Rabbi Rami Shapiro puts it this way: “Most of the time I dwell not in the world, but off to one side. My mind is occupied with a running commentary on what is going on and why it is going on. I am more like the sportscaster describing and providing color commentary to the events unfolding around me than I am like the athlete actually participating in the event” (*Minyan* 108). We spend too much time on the sidelines of our own lives. We make judgments, offer analyses, and conjure expectations about upcoming events. From that place, we do not actually *live* our lives, because we are not directly engaged with what life is handing us. In truly engaging with our lives, we risk being bounced around, getting hurt, getting dirty, and losing. In order to awaken in this way, we sacrifice the comfortable distance from which we observe. We’re forced to forego the constant attempts we make to manage our lives—looking back, looking forward, pulling the strings that we think will keep us from harm and loss.

On Yom Kippur afternoon, we will hear of Jonah, who turned and fled the other way when he received God's call to attention. He was told to go east; he headed due west. God was believed to be up above, so Jonah went down below: *down* to the port, *down* onto the ship, and when the storm came, *down* into the belly of the ship; and there...he fell asleep. Falling asleep, literally or figuratively, is a common approach we take to avoiding life's difficulties, complexities, and discomforts.

These days, and prayer in general, ask us to do something different: to turn and face the storm; to turn and face the calm, for that matter. To turn and face whatever it is, whether it be frightening or uncomfortable, or simply boring and empty. We need to pay attention. And when our attention wavers, we need to return again and again. That is what we must do in our lives. Let us have our prayer be a venue through which we cultivate that skill.

“Praying” by Mary Oliver:

It doesn't have to be / the blue iris, it could be / weeds in a vacant lot, or a few /
small stones; just / pay attention, then patch // a few words together and don't try / to
make them elaborate, this isn't / a contest but the doorway // into thanks, and a silence in
which / another voice may speak.

Sincerity (*Yosher*)

The second quality is *sincerity*.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi speaks to sincerity, when he writes: “Before we get fancy, we need to make sure that our prayers are coming from a deep and honest place. Religious acts are—should be—no more than natural unfoldings of the human condition...Whenever I talk about prayer, I always suggest not using the prayer book at first. Simply start where you are...” (*Feeling* 84).

We need to say what we mean. That is not to deny the power in prayer when we speak in metaphor, when we open our hearts to the sounds of the words, the melody, and let meaning take a back seat. But at some point, we need to give voice to, as Reb Zalman puts it, that “deep and honest place.”

Prayer, at its purest, is an arena free of deceit. How often do we allow ourselves such earnestness? How often do we communicate so authentically that we abandon any concern of how we are being perceived? Herein lies the sacrifice: in prayer, I let go of the

image of myself that I work to present to the world. To speak, to pray with true sincerity, we have to loosen our grip on the desire to have people to like us, or to think we're smart or successful or impressive. When we leave the façade at the door, our prayer becomes real. Heschel speaks of prayer as aiming less toward knowing God, and more toward "making ourselves known to God."

At times my most sincere moments in prayer are bowing. Bowing helps me cultivate humility, as well as express devotion toward what is most true and holy in my life. However we understand it, the act of bowing—like anything—becomes real when we do it with care, with a full heart, free of pretentiousness. As I walk away from prayer imbued with such sincerity, I find that I speak to others with that same sincerity. Prayer is a means for us to train a sincere heart and sincere mind, to practice the art of authentic speech and communication.

Faith (*Emunah*)

Next is *faith*. Or perhaps truer to the Hebrew, *emunah*, "trust" or "faithfulness."

"Faith," writes Sharon Salzberg, "is not a singular state that we either have or don't have, but is something that we do... [Faith] is the willingness to take the next step, to see the unknown as an adventure, to launch a journey."

The first time I went rock climbing, I was quite nervous. I would see a foothold, and tentatively reach my foot up to the spot, testing to see if it would hold my weight. But it consistently would not. A few days into the trip, an instructor saw me do this several times in a row. He came over to me and said, "That's a good spot. But you have to step completely onto it. You have to commit. That's the only way it's gonna hold your weight." He was right. It was a matter of simple physics. My weight against the rock was needed in order for me to be supported at that angle. I had to commit. If I was tentative, I would slip every time.

This is *emunah*. This is faith, trust, faithfulness. I am not talking about trusting that I will get to the top of the climb. What is at stake is whether I put myself fully into the step before me; whether I trust in this moment of the journey. I may not "succeed" in a particular way. In fact, rest assured, I will fail. Again and again. And others will fail me. Everything will not necessarily be all right. And then what? As difficult as it is from

that place of failure or rejection or fear, I need to take the next step, to trust enough to place my weight on the rock.

Emunah, trust or lived faith, is spacious. “Faith,” writes Heschel, “is not the clinging to a shrine...” There is no narrow path or definition to which we must hold. There are no direct, certified routes to heaven. But when we take that step, when we trust enough to allow the rock to bear our weight—or not, and live into the consequences—we taste the heavenly right here on earth.

“Faith,” writes Sharon Salzberg “...doesn’t carve out reality according to our preconceptions and desires. It...is the ability to move forward even without knowing. Faith, in contrast to belief, is not a definition of reality, not a received answer, but an active, open state that makes us willing to explore.”

We must be *willing to explore*, even amidst our not knowing what will come of the exploration. And there is the sacrifice. *In living a life of faithfulness, we must sacrifice our expectations of how things will be, or should be, or are supposed to be.* This is not passivity or indifference. Those represent the absence of faith. And yet it is not a gripping attachment, Heschel’s “clinging to a shrine.” Faith is the middle way. Expectations and beliefs narrow, faith widens. In faith, we renounce our attachment to a set outcome of life, and still lower our shoulder to the wind toward our vision of a better self, and a better world.

Intimacy, Being in Relationship (*Kirvah*)

The fourth and final quality of prayer that I’d like to address is *intimacy*.

I have spoken before about my time in *yeshiva*, the intensely religious place of learning in which I spent a few months before beginning rabbinical school. It was there that I first started daily wearing *tefillin*—the leather boxes and straps by which we affix two scrolls of our central prayers to our arm and forehead. There is a verse, from the prophet Hosea, which is recited as the final strap is wound around the finger. It concludes: “I will betroth you to Me with faithfulness, and you shall know God.” The symbolic expression here is that we reiterate the covenant of marriage between God and Israel. We recite that verse while wrapping something around our finger, as if it were a wedding ring. But at first, I was simply moved by the encounter with this ancient, tangible and primal ritual. And for weeks, if not months, every morning, when I said the

words, “And you shall know God,” as I pulled the strap tight around my hand, chills went through my body.

I experienced a sense of being bound, of being drawn in, of being reached out toward. The encounter would follow me throughout the day. I recall moments of challenge, confusion, and doubt, followed by my being able to draw from that well of devotion. To “know” God in this sense is not an intellectual knowing. It is a visceral knowing. It reflects the way in which we know someone near and dear to us. To know God in this way is to feel Be-ing, the Pulse of Life, *Yud-Hey-Vav-Heh*, present right here in our mouths and in our hearts. Martin Buber writes, “Of course God is the “wholly Other”; but [God] is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present...nearer to me than my I” (Smith 78-79).

The soul of prayer is *relationship*.

We all are in relationship. Whether with a spouse or partner, dear friend, parent or child, we all know what it is to have an intimate connection with another being. To pray is to cultivate receptivity to that kind of connection in our lives. And when we speak of sacrifice, the need for it is perhaps more present here than in any of the other qualities I’ve discussed. To be in relationship means to give of ourselves continuously. In developing a mature relationship of any kind, we sacrifice the desire, perhaps simply the tendency, to be, as meditation teacher Philip Moffit puts it, “the star of our own movie.” This means stepping aside, placing another’s needs, if not before, then at least on par with, our own.

And in fact, the Hebrew word for sacrifice, *korban*, shares the root of the word *karov*, “close.” We draw close—close to God, close to whom we most aspire to be, close to that for which we most yearn—through giving of ourselves. We come to know the heart of our lives through relinquishing much of what we build up that we presume will makes us happy. As those walls peel away, what is revealed is the amazing potential we each have for intimacy, for relationship, for closeness.

If you have one moment during these ten days in which you feel met, in which you sense, somewhere in your hearts of hearts, that *you are not alone*—call it “the universe meeting you half way,” whatever—*dayyeinu*. Let that be enough. Let that be

enough to be expanded upon, to be a seed to be nurtured and tended. This is the soul, the core, of prayer.

Attention, sincerity, faith or trust, and intimacy are interrelated. They inform one another, flow in and out of one another. In my experience, they are vital. They offer the lifeblood to an ongoing journey of growth and renewal. May these ten days, and the days that are born out of them, guide us toward knowing these qualities, in our prayer and in our lives. May this time we spend together be a vehicle for us each to draw close. May we learn a bit more how to give back this gift of life.

Shanah Tovah. May it be a joyous and sweet New Year for us all.