

Daven'n (Prayer) with a Jewish Heart

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What is Prayer?

Prayer is the inner work that enables us to manifest more goodness in world. It does this by evoking the presence of a higher order, by helping us to get in touch with our deeper selves. It allows us to discern what is important, and it opens a channel to help us see new possibilities and dreams.

The word prayer comes to us from the Latin word for beg. Although one component of the process does involve asking for our needs to be met, Jewish prayer is more about changing ourselves than about changing God. Perhaps we would be better off to forsake the word "prayer", and use other terminology that is more linguistically accurate. Because it is so familiar I will sometimes use the word prayer as I also explore the Hebrew words that bear upon this process.

In chapter 6 of Genesis, God comes to Noah and says "the World is filled with man's crime and, I will therefore destroy humanity with the Earth." In response, Noah says nothing. God then gives Noah a list of instructions. Again, Noah says nothing. Instead, being a "righteous and pious man", we are told he did exactly as God literally instructed.

A couple centuries of biblical time later in chapter 18, Abraham is faced with a similar situation. God sends angels to tell Abraham that Sodom is so full of evil it must be destroyed." Abraham, of course, debates God, and it is in this dialog that we find the first real *conversation* between man and God. This encounter is the First Story of Jewish prayer. When I think about this story, and about how we pray, I've found my own way to conceptualize this process in terms of concrete steps with which Abraham, and now we, can create a meaningful and healing conversation with the Divine.

Stage 1. Summoning God

The Torah tells that the angels leave. Abraham is left alone with his despair, and yet, the verse tells us that he continues to "stand before God." This is the first miracle of prayer. How does Abraham achieve this? One definition of prayer is *any practices that help us to "see" God when the angels are far away.*

The traditional service uses what are known as the eighteen blessings to invoke the presence of God. These prayers are said loud enough for your own heart to hear, but not so that your neighbors can hear. There are actually nineteen, not eighteen, but who's counting. The purpose of the prayers is to evoke the qualities that we associate with the Divine, such as understanding, wisdom, peace and healing.

A related way to do this comes from Kaballah. The tree of life is composed of ten Sepherot. These are the channels of Divine energy whereby Divine will is manifest in our world. More simply, each Sepherot is associated with particular ideals or principles. For example, Gevurah represents justice, and Tiferet beauty. By evoking these ten holy principles we bring the Divine into our awareness.

These holy principles are also expressed in the natural and human world. Some find nature the best place to find the Divine. Others may find it in art, poetry, and music.

Religious terminology can be a trap. What we are seeking here is the place of inner truth that transcends limiting and judgmental thoughts and categories. It is not really about affirming a personal deity but of affirming the unity of all being. It has been said that there is no proof of God, only witnesses. Prayer requires contact with a higher order of being whatever one chooses to call it.

Stage 2. Going In

The heart of the Jewish Service is the Amidah. Amidah simply means standing, but it does not refer to the fact that we get up from our chairs, but because now we are to stand alone before the Divine. In the light of the Holy One we stand with our hearts open.

I assume that Noah had some feelings about the coming flood. But, apparently he did not know how to summon the presence of God and go within to meet Her as an equal. What allowed Abraham to stand before God?

The Torah records an encounter between God and Abram (before being given the name Abraham) some 25 years before the angels came to tell him about Sodom. In this encounter God gives Abram a command, *Lech Lecha*. It is commonly translated as “Go forth.” But in fact, *Lecha* means to *you*. “Going forth” is actually something Abram is to do to himself. *Lech Lecha* may be best translated as “Go within.”

In our example from Torah, what is it that Abraham is feeling? The torah is not explicit in describing his emotional state. But Abraham’s comments are suggestive. Will you actually wipe out the innocent together with the guilty?... Shall the whole world’s judge not act justly?” Abraham appears to be upset and scared.

The path to seeing God is through the heart. But, we often protect our heart. Knowledge of our deeper feelings is our first big challenge. We must bring our feelings into conscious awareness. What is bothering us? Am I angry, sad, afraid, in pain?

We easily get lost in blame, shame and beliefs. For example, some surface feelings that many of you can relate to can be stated as follows, “I feel George Bush is a Schlemiel and the American people, especially those who voted for him are meshuga.” But, are these really feelings?

Not according to the wisdom of Marshall Rosenberg, developer of Non-Violent or Compassionate Communication. His personal experience of anti-Semitism and his search to understand his own pain led to his realization that often our thoughts and beliefs are passed off as feelings but really only serve to protect us from experiencing our true feelings. When we let go of that judgment, both of self and of others, then we can acknowledge the truth of our heart.

Another way into feelings is through the body. Where in the body do I feel the feeling? Describe the sensations involved. Many ancient world views including those of the Middle East understood that emotions correlated to and were held in various body parts. The Eastern system of chakras or energy transformation centers in the body provides a way to bridge the Sepherot concept with the body.

Stage 3 – Discernment

Now comes the work of prayer. This stage of prayer is spiritual introspection. What do I want? What do I need?

We can and often do ask for what we want without bothering with introspection. We are made in the image of God. We have creative powers. And our desires do affect the world. When we are desperate we stoop to begging and bargaining. But prayer much more than the power of intention and has little to do with begging. It is about clarifying what is important in the light of our highest spiritual principles. In the words from the Siddur Avodas HaLev (The Service of the Heart), “Tifilah is the soul’s yearning to define what truly matters and to ignore the trivialities that often masquerade as essential.”

The Hebrew words for prayer emphasize the importance of this process. The word Tefilah comes from the root meaning to peel away, cut, or separate. Sometimes it is defined as to judge, but since it is not about bad versus good, but rather sorting out the essential versus the trivial, I think discernment is a better term.

Another word for prayer Hitpelayl is the reflexive form of Tefilah; i.e. something we do to ourselves. Hitpelayl emphasizes that this discernment is not something done to us, but something we must do for ourselves.

One way of thinking about spiritual needs is to inventory the divine principles or the ten Sepherot and sense if any are weak or out of balance in our lives. Again, our feelings often hold the key. Will more justice ease my anger? Will more healing ease my pain?

Reading between the lines it is evident that Abraham needed to know that God is Just and Compassionate.

Stage 4 – The Complaint

The real power of prayer is achieved through what Martin Buber call the I- thou relationship. It is simply the ability to relate to the Divine in the second person, the *You*. In the “as if” consciousness we speak to God as though She were present right in front of us. In Hebrew the word Kivyachol signifies this idea of “as it were.”

God certainly is not a person in any sense that we normally can imagine. But, it is only through the other that we can truly connect. At best, belief in God has no bearing on the process of prayer. At worst, beliefs can be an obstacle that interferes with our experience. In the words of Buber, “If to believe in God means to talk about Him in the third person, than I do not believe in God. If to believe in God means to be able to talk to God, then I do believe in God.”

A complaint is more than a statement of our dissatisfaction. It comes from the root *plak* meaning *hit* and refers to the old habit of hitting ones chest in anguish. It is in the complaint that the process of relating becomes real.

If we were to hear a more complete version of Abraham’s complaint it might sound like this. “I am in terrible pain just from the thought that the universe could be such an unforgiving place.

I feel like a lamb that has lost its way, exposed to the storms and the wolves. I feel terribly sad, angry, and scared. I need to live in a world with a just and compassionate God.” Abraham has articulated the very imbalance which causes him such distress, and by this has called out to the Ray of Justice, and has invited it to manifest itself in his life and in the world.

God likes a good story. Of course it is really us that needs to remember and hear our story in a way that has meaning. Here our personal history takes on meaning. What childhood or life experiences feed into our feelings, sensitivities, and needs?

Linguistically, English is a language descended from languages of the mind. Its symbols tend to be abstract and logical, even when discussing something as emotional as feeling itself. This can make it inherently difficult to bare our feelings in English, without obfuscating them with beliefs, thoughts, and judgments.

Contrast this to Hebrew and Yiddish. They are much more sensory-based than Greek, Latin, or English. For example, an English translation of the Torah might say that someone was angry. In actuality, the Torah describes nostrils-flaring. Hebrew tends to be much more image-evocative than English. For example, the word often rendered as leader in Hebrew literally describes *one who makes the oak trees twist*. The Hebrew for father literally means *one who gives strength to family* And mother is *one who binds family together*.

If we insist on talking to God in English, then we must strive to learn not to over-intellectualize during this stage of prayer. It may help if we make a conscious effort to speak more poetically, perhaps utilizing as many metaphoric images as we can. Whenever possible we might anchor our feelings in our body and in our sensory experience.

For example, regarding Bush's war, here is my complaint. "You, the source of all justice, power, courage, wisdom and compassion, I feel my blood rise at the injustice of Bush's needless killing and waste and my stomach twists when I think of the tactics he used to make us too dizzy to notice his real aims and I am blind bird and I tremble with fear when my fellow countrymen allow such a man to direct our path.

I Baruch You (I evoke an increased awareness of You and Your manifestation in my world). May there be more justice, walking upright. May we have leaders with wisdom, able to think with their heart. May the people have courage, the strength to stand what they know to be true in their hearts. May my bowels find comfort as I fill with compassion for my anger and fear and the difficulties of my nation."

Stage 5 - Listening

In hearing our hearts lament that which is holy within us will respond. And when we focus on listening for an answer we can begin to hear, "the still small voice within."

It may come as words, perhaps as a remembered conversation. But it may also come as images, thoughts and feelings. This phase of prayer is timeless, and may extend indefinitely beyond our time of formal prayer. We can never know how and when God may answer us.

Regardless of the form in which God chooses to speak to us, we are meant to understand. It is in this moment that the last miracle of prayer takes place. God gifts us with an incredible thing. Our eyes and God's, for the briefest second, become one. We and God both make a request, a decision, which is specific and concrete and visionary.

Another name for Jewish Prayer is *Daven'n*. It comes from the Latin *divination* which literally means to be inspired by a God. Divining or daven'n is really the purpose of Jewish Prayer.

It is not about asking from God, but about giving to the world. In the same Parsha where Abram is told to go within, God tells Abram, *shemecha veheyeh berachah*, "You shall become *beracha*, a blessing". God is telling Abram of the power to evoke an increase in the awareness and manifestation of the *Was/Is/Well be* consciousness and potential into the world. With the knowledge of the power to bless comes the responsibility to use it effectively.

When Abraham called upon the Sepherot of Justice, when he said "I need to live in a world with a just God" then God answered in kind. "I will not destroy Sodom for the sake of ten good people". For that moment, Abraham and God are attuned, and make a specific commitment to justice together.

It is the same in our prayers. When we have followed the stages of prayer, they lead us to a moment with God. When we learn to listen to God's voice, than Her vision and ours become one vision, and we can release the conflict that has brought us here with the peaceful knowledge that we are walking God's path and our own path.

So then, what answers might I expect from my complaints to Hashem about the condition of our government. Here are some possibilities:

- It could be a voice with the words, "When you awaken from your decadent, jaded, entitled dream you will attract the leaders you need."
- It may a tear of recognition in seeing the sunset of the one sun in its colorful splendor shooting rays all working in harmony and knowledge of their interdependence.
- It may be the words of a PBS special on Thomas Jefferson echoing in my mind like distant memory "An enlightened citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic."
- Or, maybe something stirring me to remind you that one of the presidential candidates' first name is the Arabic form of Baruch.

Prayer is a personal process. There is no test, nor can there ever be, as to whether you did it right. It is said, when the Rabbis of old were asked, “How will I know if my prayers were completed correctly?” The Rabbis answered, “You will know by two measures:

- Did you genuinely feel a sense of awe, an experience of oneness beyond words?
- Has your thoughts and behavior been changed? Are you more of a blessing to the world?”

The idea that we can talk to God is perhaps the greatest heresy imaginable. Judaism proposes a God that we can't imagine, that we cannot name, whose face we cannot look upon, and yet we stand before Him and speak to Him as an equal. But, if such an “as if” encounter meets the above criteria than who has the standing to say we did not talk with God.