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A PRIMER ON SPIRITUAL PRAYER

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Virtually all of us become seekers of spiritual experience—eventually. If we're affiliated with a congregation we tend to assume that prayer is the path to an enlightening and uplifting spiritual experience, regardless of how many times we're disappointed in that expectation, not uncommonly because we have a variety of misunderstandings about Jewish prayer.

This primer on spiritual prayer explores what congregational prayer often mistakenly means to us, and how we have it within our power to make it much more spiritually meaningful.

Through our prayer we seek closeness, a sense of unity, even intimacy with God. We hope for a lessening of fear, anxiety, and uncertainty, a diminution of the spirit-deadening pressures of our day-to-day lives. We pray to express our longing for love, peace and contentment.

So *how* do we try to achieve these spiritual objectives through prayer?

The common, instinctive understanding we have about prayer is summed up in the Hebrew word *bakasha* (בקשה)—an appeal, request, or plea for what we want. Our *bakasha* is for everything from saving a child's life to acquiring a new car.

It raises the question, whom are we trying to influence with our prayer?

Ordinarily we're trying to influence, appease, propitiate, manipulate, somehow convince God to do what we want, to give us what we think we need. But the frequent doubt we have about these "bail-out communications to heaven" is why the Mastermind of all Creation should be paying attention to our personal prob-

lems and petitions. And, of course, what's the point of pleading and begging if God doesn't pay attention?

Our tradition teaches that we become "worthy" of such attention—we'll come back momentarily to what it means to be worthy—through our praying, which sounds circular on first hearing: We become worthy of God hearing our prayers if we pray? It has an absurd ring to it because we've internalized the English meaning of the word "prayer," which is based on a Latin root, which means "to beg."

Hitpalel (התפלל), the reflexive Hebrew verb for "praying," is from the root פ-ל-ל, however, which relates to judging and bringing together. Thus our understanding is that the primary purpose of congregational praying is not to express our emotions or lift up our personal pleading—we can do those things privately anywhere, anytime—but to *take in* from the liturgy a greater truth for the purpose of self-judgment, appraising and uplifting ourselves, to become unified with God's purposes.

The purpose of this intake is to change our consciousness and our day-to-day existence, our actions in the world. When we have engaged ourselves in such praying, we become worthy of God's attention—not for some magical, mystical mumbo-jumbo reason, but because, in effect, the opportunities that God has created for us become apparent and accessible by virtue of our heightened consciousness and knowledge.

A second way we often try to get close to God (and reduce stress, etc.) through prayer is *tehilot* (תהלות)—praises. *Tehilot*, from the Hebrew root ה-ל-ל, means to radiate, or, in the Piel form of the verb, to reflect rays.

We don't actually see God, of course, but we see radiations of the Divine Power in the Creation, which we're often inclined to praise spontaneously: "My God—that's beautiful," we say of an extraordinary vista, flower, or act of human kindness or justice.

What good is our praise?

It may give us a moment of contentment, but such spiritual satisfaction is typically short-lived. It has virtually no effect on the spirit-poisoning conditions of our lives, which require a great deal more than repetition of a verbal formula for their remediation. Praise as *verbal* homage is empty and without meaning, mere "lip service" as Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch would say, if it doesn't inspire us to bless God by allying ourselves to the Divine Will in practical ways. And certainly we do that by learning, fulfilling, and teaching the precepts given to us in the Torah.

The *hitpalel* we're describing rarely comes naturally. It's evident that to engage ourselves in this kind of praying requires that we're already primed to approach and achieve spiritual goals with a high degree of maturity and responsibility—literally, we need to have a willingness and ability to respond for ourselves. So while *hitpalel* has the wherewithal to change us—and, through us, the world around us—we have to prepare ourselves to be changed. We have to open our minds and hearts to the extraordinary intelligence and power of the Creator through our *yirat* Adoshem (יראת יהוה) and *emunah* (אמונה).

We usually see *yirat* Adoshem translated as fear or awe of God. Awe and fear of God may be usefully understood, respectively, as (a) *continuously keeping or* (b) *failing to keep God in mind*, which is not the same as a small child's fear of a parent, but more akin to the consciousness we have of the benefits and burdens we assume as parents, employees, neighbors, etc. Each of these roles offers access to worthwhile benefits if we conscientiously fulfill our responsibilities; each promises frightening burdens if we fail to respond.

Awe stems from *constant consciousness* of the power of God or whatever one calls the creative power in the universe, which produces a sense of respect, reverence, and wonder, inspired by the genius and beauty of this power, which is far beyond one's own powers. *Awe* implicitly acknowledges that God has created a plethora of goodness in the world, which can redound to our benefit and that of our community, our people, our country, and all of humankind.

Fear is a natural consequence of the *failure to remain conscious* of God or the creative power in the universe—that is, the failure to continually recognize that the creation operates by certain rules—with the result that one anticipates suffering damaging or even deadly consequences. *Fear* implicitly acknowledges that God created the universe according to the Torah's blueprint, which entails educational consequences for those who fail to learn its lessons.

Withal, *yirat* Adoshem only begins to have practical implications for our everyday lives when we discipline ourselves to respond to its demands for *emunah*—faith, with the fundamental meaning of depending or relying upon the truth of someone or something.

What is "faith" in this context, and how do we express it practically?

We're faithful when our awe and fear of God lead us to follow our inclination to sanctify life, even though our reason and experience tell us it's a futile gesture. If we have *yirat* Adoshem and *emunah*, we're prepared to depend and rely fully upon the *ol mahchut shamayim* (עול מלכות שמים), the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, which is given to us in the Torah, notwithstanding all the mundane considerations that militate against us.

If we call upon ourselves daily with the Shema to do these things, we can expect a number of predictable outcomes:

- We will experience *kirvat* Adoshem (קרבת יהוה), nearness to God—existentially, in our continuous *lived* experience, not momentarily or as an intellectual exercise.
- We will be *redeemed*, which we can understand from the Hebrew root of the word, ל-א-ג, which means to be released from danger, purged of that which poisons or pollutes us—that is to say, we will have transformed ourselves, which is the purpose of Jewish prayer.
- And lastly, because of all the foregoing, we will have made ourselves worthy to have our prayerful pleadings answered by the appearance and accessibility of the radiated light of God's blessings.

So whom are we trying to influence with our praying? Would it not seem at this point that we are the direct object of our praying, not God?

But all of this leaves out any consideration of fixed, communal prayer, which suggests a number of questions. Why don't we all limit our praying to when it's convenient for us as individuals? What's wrong with basing our decision about when to uplift ourselves with prayer (a fundamental purpose of Jewish prayer) on whenever "the spirit moves us"? What difference would it make if we didn't all pray the same liturgy? And aren't we all equally capable of praying directly to God, so who needs a Siddur, prayer-leader, and congregation?

Our Torah tradition holds out hope for our individual redemption through our redemption as a people. The lesson of Abraham's argument with God about sparing Sodom from destruction (Genesis 18:23-32) is that we must at least begin with a *minyan* (quorum) of ten in any place we establish ourselves if we're to have any realistic hope of confronting, containing, and converting evil to good. But even more to the point, our redemption as a people is linked inextricably to our covenantal mission, which is to be a light to the nations, one that transforms the world in the image of God. The tradition that envisions and energizes this breathtaking

aspiration contemplates a way of life that requires a committed community to advance its godly purposes. And like all communities that survive and succeed for their members—not only for the strong and learned but the weak and uneducated too—our way of life relies on a shared vision, dependable organization and leadership, discipline and devotion.

When our thinking about prayer moves from child-like imaginings—typical among adults who have not received religious education beyond bar or bat mitzvah age—to adult insight, we see a critical change of focus for the object of our prayer: from God to ourselves to our community.

We acknowledge that this view of prayer may have the disadvantage of intimidating lesser-motivated spirituality seekers. It demands a relatively high level of religious and spiritual maturity and responsibility. But because it doesn't violate our commonsense or infantilize us, thus implicitly not devaluing and distancing us from genuinely uplifting prayer, it has the advantage of making congregational worship a productive and consistently fulfilling activity of our day-to-day lives. And if we accept and practice prayer as it has been understood in our tradition, we have the potential to change not only ourselves, but also our community and the larger world in which we live.

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