

# GATHER THE PEOPLE

Community and Faith-Based Organizing and Development Resources

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## GOD'S WARDEN

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Why pray? What's the point?

It's a cynic's question, of course. And there probably aren't any cynics reading these words. So why are we asking this question?

We're asking it because of all the Jews we all know—friends, co-workers, perhaps even our own family—who could be with us in synagogue on Shabbat, but aren't, who don't show up in our or any synagogue.

They don't show up because they don't see the point of it. They have, what we like to call, a gunnysack of objections about the Torah and Judaism.

If they dared to ask us, they might say something like: Why should I spend my day off at the synagogue when I could get some work done around the house or go to the mall? Or . . . do you *really* think God is going to answer you just because you say the magic Hebrew words?

What do we say to them?

Most of the time, of course, they don't ask, which means that if we're going to answer their gunnysack of objections, we have to be the ones to raise them.

Now maybe you say: Who, me? I'm not a teacher. Why should I get in anybody's face with Jewish?

Remember the posters of Uncle Sam that used to appear in the post office? You know the one: Uncle Sam wants you!—with the finger pointing at us. Our Torah does the same thing! As our rabbis tell us, regarding the giving of the Torah in *parasha* (weekly Torah reading) Yitro, we were all of us there, at Sinai. And we are all of us responsible to teach.

But if we're not ready to do that, then may-

be we'd better get ourselves ready to accept that they, the ones with the gunnysack, will drift away from the Jewish people and from us, perhaps forever. The bottom line is: Uncle Shmueli wants *us*! Because, let's face it, the thing that our friends the cynics are drifting towards, whether it's Christian or atheist, promotes all the wrong ideas.

In the *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain (who, we are told, was probably an atheist), Huckleberry is told by his foster parent, Miss Watson, that if he prays for something, he will get it. Huckleberry tests the theory and is mightily disappointed. He says, "It warn't so. I tried it. Once I got a fish-line, but no hooks. I tried for the hooks three times, but somehow I couldn't make it work."

And a lot of the rest of us can't seem to make it work either, even if our prayer is a million miles from Huckleberry's. And sometimes . . . it's not. In a way, that shouldn't surprise us. After all, the Miss Watson model for praying is the one that prevails in the popular culture of this country—prayer as a kind of begging, prayer as a way to change God's mind.

Now, we don't say that, as Jews, we should never ask for things. Personal requests have their place, albeit limited, in our services. Who hasn't begged God to spare the life of a sick child, or prayed for help when the x-ray comes back showing a lump?

But if that's the only reason for prayer, then what do we say to the parent whose child *doesn't* get well? And if that is the only reason, then why come to synagogue to pray? And why use a siddur? Why not stay home

and pray our own prayers?

Let us consider what our tradition has to say about this. Prayer, our rabbis say, is שיח (*siakh*). *Siakh* is a bush. In the account of the creation of the world, the Torah tells us: וְכֹל שִׂיחַ הַשָּׂדֶה טָרָם יִהְיֶה בְּאֶרֶץ (*V'khol siakh hasadeh terem yihiyeh va'aretz*—Bereshit 2:5)—all the growth of the field was still in the state that it was before it came into being on the earth, that is, before it had sprouted. Why? Because God had not caused it to rain upon the earth and human beings were not there to work the soil.

*Siakh* is a bush that soaks up water when the rain comes, and if it doesn't, it dies.

And so do we die, our rabbis say, if we don't soak up the life-giving fluid on which our lives depend. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch tells us, “praying is simply drinking from the source of all spiritual life, watering all the fibers and filaments of our inner being to produce new blossoms.” (Hirsch commentary on Bereshit 2:5)

But what exactly is it that we're supposed to be soaking up? And why should our lives depend on it?

The other word for prayer, of course, is תפילה (*tefilah*), which comes from the root פ-ל-ל (*fei-lamed-lamed*). התפלל (*hitpaleil*—“praying”) means to judge oneself. But, as Rabbi Hirsch tells us, the root *fei-lamed-lamed* is related to the root ב-ל-ל (*vet-lamed-lamed*), which means to absorb something from the outside. It means to add something new to a mix, and work it in until the new element is completely absorbed. (Hirsch commentary on Bereshit 11:7)

For those of us who make challah, this will be familiar. If we put the dry ingredients into a mixer and turn it on, the flour may whirl around forever and make a mess, but it will never make bread. On the other hand, once we add the wet ingredients, the mixture is changed chemically. The addition of water to the flour creates gluten, an elastic mass of molecules that trap the gas from the ferment-

ing yeast and make it possible for the bread to rise.

And that is what should happen to us. By means of judging ourselves, we—like the dough—are meant to change, if not chemically, then intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, perhaps even physically.

But if *fei-lamed-lamed* is related to *vet-lamed-lamed*, then, by definition it must mean that the element by which we are to judge ourselves, the new thing, has to come from outside of us. It cannot mean that we are to judge ourselves on the basis of our own feelings, which is what the popular culture in our country promotes—you know: just do what feels right, follow your bliss!

The question then, is: What is this new element? What is this thing coming from outside us, by which we are to judge ourselves? The answer, of course, is that we, like the bush that soaks up water, are to soak up the words of Torah as they appear in our prayers, by means of which we are to judge ourselves.

The purpose of prayer is to change us, not God.

Why pray? We pray in order to take stock, to reevaluate, to learn what we're doing wrong and fix it.

But what happens if we don't do that?

Rabbi Hirsch says that if we are not changed by the words of these prayers; if, when we leave this place we do not behave differently because of them . . . then we have failed. Then, says Rabbi Hirsch, our prayer is lip service, literally a service of the lips and nothing more. Then our prayer has become an end in itself.

The prophet Isaiah, whom we read about in our Haftarah for *parashat Yitro*, lived at a time of such failure. Every week, we recite his words from 2600 years ago in the Kedusha: *kadosh, kadosh, kadosh*—holy, holy, holy.

But he lived at a time that represents the very antithesis of those words, a time in which the world became more and more corrupt. He lived at a time when the people themselves

had willfully forgotten what was required of them by the Torah, and had substituted the worship service in its stead. He lived at a time when even the king himself, King Uzziah, participated in this self-deception, coming to regard himself as both king and priest, which is expressly forbidden by Jewish law.

But then Isaiah, not unlike Moses and the entire Jewish people at Sinai, receives a revelation.

What does he see?

He perceives the Shechinah sitting on a throne hovering above the roof of the Temple, surrounded by fiery angels with six wings. He sees the Shechinah is moving *away* from the earth. In its wake the Temple pillars tremble. The place fills up with smoke. It seems that his world is about to come apart at the seams.

But like Moses (about whom our rabbis say,

it took God seven days to convince him to go to Egypt), Isaiah doesn't think he's good enough to do anything about it.

Nonetheless, just as he's telling himself that, one of the angels flies down to him and puts a burning coal to his lips. (Isaiah 6:6)

Wow!

What's it got to do with us?

After all, 2600 years ago is a *long* time ago. Perhaps we tell ourselves: That was then, this is now. Things are different. But are they?

Let us imagine that Isaiah could write to us, personally—shoot us an email across the 26 centuries, so to speak, a letter to the family gathered here.

Let us imagine for a moment that time is no obstacle.

In that spirit, we offer you this poem. It's called: God's Warden.

Dearest family,  
How can I ever begin  
To tell you all  
That happens here  
These days?  
Except to say that  
When folks see me  
They ask,  
What's with the long face  
Isaiah?  
As if they didn't know  
God is in jail,  
A prisoner  
Of the sanctuary.  
And we, who were to be

A kingdom of priests,  
A holy nation  
Have put Him there  
And made ourselves  
The warden.  
That is what  
I wanted to say.  
But didn't.  
Never,  
Will I forget this year.  
I'm wondering  
If you've heard  
That King Uzziah died,  
A brave and noble king  
(Some say)  
That is, until  
He had to be  
Hustled out  
Of God's precinct  
Since he forgot  
(In drunken pride)  
He was a Jewish king  
And not a priest.  
I guess he thought  
He *was* the state.  
He wasn't  
The only one.

All this year  
The deluded people—  
The very ones who said  
On the mountain of God,  
We will do Your will  
And listen to it always—  
Do nothing but forget.  
They imagine  
That they've done  
All that's required of them  
By singing songs  
And carrying out  
Procedures.  
If not the holy,  
(They think)  
It gives at least  
A certain effect  
Of the holy,  
In place of that which  
God had told us:  
*Be* holy,  
For I, your God,  
Am holy!  
Can you imagine?  
With those words  
We could have risen up  
(Even our mortal selves)

Like birds!  
Up and up and up!  
But we didn't.  
I guess we thought  
We'd already  
Raised ourselves  
By getting rich and fat.  
Did we really think  
That holiness begins and ends  
At Temple doors?  
Remember how it used to be?  
So long ago,  
When we were kind and just  
And God came down  
And lived with us?  
I was thinking of that  
Just the other day  
When I looked up  
And saw . . .  
(You'll never believe)  
Hovering up so high  
It barely touched  
The roof  
Of the so-called  
House of God—  
So far away, it soon  
Would disappear

From earth—  
God's throne!  
Yes, I know  
What you're thinking:  
You, Isaiah?  
But there it is.  
What's more,  
I thought  
I heard God say:  
So . . . let Me  
Get this straight.  
The heavens  
Are My Throne,  
And earth,  
A Footstool for My Feet,  
And yet you thought  
You had to build a place  
For Me to rest? . . .  
More a place  
To hold Me down,  
I think.  
And He was right, too.  
Like I said,  
A prison  
Is what they built.  
For the people  
Have made *themselves*

Their gods.  
And do not want Him  
Interfering  
In their lives.  
And when I looked again  
(It hurt my eyes to see)  
I saw the Seraphim  
Lean down  
To welcome God  
Away from earth,  
Away from us.  
I saw how far  
We really are  
From what, like them,  
We're meant to do—  
To bless by serving.  
Like them,  
With wings,  
Two to cover our face  
And two our feet  
And two with which to fly,  
Not seeing therefore  
Where we go,  
Nor looking where we stand  
Yet using all our strength  
To raise God's will.  
But it was not to be.



Not yet. Not now.  
Don't ask me why.  
For even a blade of grass  
Knows how to serve  
Its maker's purpose!  
I just know that  
Only angels do  
These days  
In heaven  
What we were meant  
To do on earth.  
I ask you  
How can I bear  
The things I've seen?  
From one end  
Of heaven  
To the other  
I hear the angels cry  
Holy, holy, holy,  
All is filled  
With God's glory!  
But here on earth  
It's *not*?  
I see now why  
The Temple pillars  
Tremble at their cry.  
I see the fire

On the altar going out.  
I see that soon  
We'll fade away in smoke.  
It seems the earth itself  
Can neither bear  
The things I've seen.  
But why must I be silent?  
My people may be  
Blind and deaf  
But why must I be dumb!  
I'll tell you why.  
I fear they will not listen.  
They'll say:  
Who are you?  
You're just like us.  
And they'd be right.  
I am like them.  
Not good enough.  
But in that very moment  
One of the Seraphim  
Flew down  
And with his hands  
He held  
A piece of coal.  
He put it to my lips.  
It did not burn me,  
Though he, an angel,

Held it with a pair of tongs.

Like us,

Its fire was fading

And yet its inner heart

Still hid a glow.

And here is what he said:

By this your lips

Are consecrated.

Your lips

Will sin no more.

Preserve this holy fire!

Blow!

And I blew!

I breathed it into flame.

And in that very moment

I heard a Voice saying:

Whom shall I send?

Who will stand up

For Me on earth?

And I said:

Here I am.

Send me! . . .

But then I dared to ask:

My people's

Conscience sleeps, oh Lord,

How long,

How long will this go on?

And here is what He said:  
When fields lie wasted  
And cities emptied out  
With houses none  
To live in them  
And fattened hearts grow thin,  
Only then will misfortune  
Uncover every heart  
And open up our eyes and ears.  
And teach us all to know  
That peace,  
The so-called dream  
Of childish minds,  
Is only so as long  
As we refuse  
To offer up  
Our just and moral lives.  
And in the end  
He told me:  
Even your words  
Will not save  
Them all.  
Only a remnant  
Will remain. . . .  
I ask you,  
Dear ones,  
How can I bear

The things I've seen?  
I know that  
We must pay  
For what we've done.  
Still the future's there  
For you to sow  
A seed of holiness.  
One thing's sure.  
Never  
Will I forget this year.  
I hope it finds you  
In good health.  
I'm writing to you  
From Jerusalem  
To say  
For God's sake,  
Don't do what we have done.

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