

Discovering the Power of Prayer

This evening I want to speak about the power of prayer, the role it can play in our lives, and the way we can use it to change the world. And, while I am both a rabbinical student and long-time practitioner, the truth is I am really only at the beginning of understanding what prayer is and how it works. Moreover, while each of us has come here tonight, to prayer services, I worry that as a culture we have to a large extent lost touch with the power of a prayer practice. That somewhere along the way a distance emerged between the prayer and the pray-er, and that at a moment when it has the potential to be the most influential, we are underutilizing one of our greatest spiritual tools.

Personally, prayer and I have had a kind of on again off again relationship. As a young kid I davvened shacharit every morning at day school, and remember the excitement that came along with my turn to lead. As I got a bit older I participated in additional prayer education at shul as I prepared for my bar-mitzva, and by the time I was thirteen, like many of the young people who grow up in shul, I was intimately familiar with the Shabbat and weekday services. Soon after my bar-mitzva I began teaching other young people to davven as they prepared for their own beni-mitzvot. My favorite prayer experiences as a kid though were always at camp, where the psalms seem to come alive as we sang and danced together during Shabbat services by the lake. These experiences laid the foundation upon which my relationship with prayer continues to be built. Yet at some point as a young adult I became burdened by the realization that all I was teaching, and all that I knew, was how to say the prayers but not how to actually pray. The fact of the matter was that after years I didn't have the slightest clue what a lot of the service was

really about and often what I could understand didn't fit with my own sense of the world. I didn't like much of the language of the siddur, or the images of God it portrayed. Pretty quickly I became disinterested in services which all too often felt distant and inaccessible, not to mention boring, and so prayer kind of fell out of my life.

As an adult looking to build my own spiritual practice, it wasn't until I encountered prayer outside of our tradition that I began to understand the different forms prayer can take and how transformative it could be. As a college student, I spent a semester in Japan studying Buddhist meditation. In the monastery, every action is an element of the practice of mindfulness. During my time there I developed a powerful relationship with silence and contemplation. These tools have changed the way I engage not only in the silent spaces of Jewish prayer, but have also helped me in identifying the opportunities for prayer that arise in everyday moments. A few years later as young college grad in Baltimore I found a sort of second home at a place called Jonah House, a catholic non-violence community dedicated to a spiritual practice which aims to dismantle systems of militarization and oppressive power in this country and around the world. With the unexpected guidance of my dear friend and teacher Sister Ardeth Platte, for the first time in my life I saw what it meant to ground prayer in values, and the power prayer could have as a tool for protest and resistance. And it was as a hospital chaplain that I first learned what it means to pray with spontaneity, as I held the hands of people who had just lost a loved one and listened as words of prayer found their way directly from heart to lips. In my own prayer training I had been oriented to think of prayer as recitational, but here in the hospital, I encountered for the first time what a generative and extemporaneous prayer could look and feel like.

Along the path of my spiritual journey, Jewish prayer and the siddur also came to life in new ways. In Uganda I sang kabbalat Shabbat to incredible African tunes with the Abayudaya, on the farm at the Pearlstone center I learned to davven barefoot and connect my prayers to the earth. In friends living rooms from Brooklyn to Jerusalem I found the intersection of prayer and community, and still I am consistently amazed when I come into shuls around the country who have found ways to offer a variety of distinctly Jewish prayer spaces and experiences. Along the way there were times when prayer felt incredibly moving and also times when I struggled to connect. As I have continued to grow in my, deeply Jewish and rather traditional prayer practice, I have brought each of these encounters with me. I share my story not to establish a criterion for building a prayer practice but rather as an acknowledgment of the complexity of doing so, as a way to demonstrate that there is no one route to take, and as an invitation to join me on this journey regardless of where you are at this moment.

Let's step back for a second and think about what prayer is. Prayer is many things and serves many purposes, but at its core I understand prayer to be the space we make for that which is in the depths of our hearts to come out into the world. Prayer is the spiritual force we can use to change the world around us, and prayer is the act by which we reconcile who we are with who we want to be. The Hebrew verb used to describe the act of prayer, l'hitpalel, shares its etymological root, pa'lel with the word that means to judge. We might therefore translate the reflexive form that we use to say "to pray" more accurately as – to judge oneself. When we pray we are opening ourselves to God in an act of self and divine judgment. Not judgement in terms of sentencing, but

instead something more like evaluation. In this way, prayer can serve as a spiritual assessment of where we and the world are at, and a practice of visioning the world we are striving towards. The reflection and judgment aspects of prayer are not an end unto themselves though. On the contrary, they are tools which we, the practitioners, can use as a catalyst for change both within ourselves and the world at large.

There are three basic categories of prayers each of which I believe offers a unique manifestation of this practice of assessment and progression. The first category, prayers of praise, acknowledge the wonder and beauty of the divine, and illuminate our relationship to it. These are the prayers that we offer in the moments when we might otherwise be speechless. When I encounter something beyond my comprehension in the world I can proclaim, invoking that primordial moment that started it all, *baruch ata hashem eloheinu melech ha'olam oseh ma'aseh bereshit* – blessed are you God, spirit of the universe, who makes the works of creation. Unfortunately, I do this far less often than I would like. In the hustle and bustle of day to day life I regularly brush past opportunities to stop and be amazed. Prayers of praise can be an antidote to the symptoms of this fast-paced life, offering not only an affirmation of the wonder of the world but also a way of being in it.

The second category, petition, is what many of us immediately think of when we hear the word prayer. These are the “please Gods”. Personally, I find petition to be the most difficult to get in to. I think it is hard because it doesn't fit within my theological framework. I just don't really believe that I can make requests of God and expect them to be granted. On the other hand, there have been times in my life when a plea felt like my most authentic expression, moments when the need to call out for help simply

overwhelmed me. In resolving these two seemingly disparate realities, I have tried to shift my conception of what petition can be. Instead of simply asking for something I want, I have learned that petition begins with acknowledging my own shortcomings and need for support so that I am not just asking for help, but learning to be humble enough to recognize and accept guidance and assistance in the many forms that it appears.

Lastly, there are prayers of thanksgiving. In giving thanks we take stock in the blessings of our lives, acknowledging the preciousness of the gifts we have been given, and our ability to use them as stewards of the world we have inherited. If praise is what I strive for, and petition is what I sometimes feel I need, it is thanksgiving that I all too often overlook. It is easy to forget to stop and say thank you, but in doing so I find that I cultivate a sense of gratitude that permeates all aspects of my life. Gratitude is the essential element of prayer, without it, there can be no petition nor praise. As Rabbi Mike Comins notes, “Gratitude is the everyday heart opener of spiritual practice. While the heart responds in more dramatic fashion to major life events, good and bad, there is nothing like saying thanks to ground the more routine, and thus the more difficult - and the more important – rhythms of regular spiritual practice.” The cultivation of gratitude, the humility to ask for help, and the exuberance of praise, are each aspects of prayer that help us connect our spiritual practice to our work in the world.

Prayer of course is the cornerstone of Jewish spiritual practice and the bulk of our ritual expression both in and out of the synagogue. Our tradition prescribes a set prayer service three times daily. The rabbis of the Talmud tell us that our first words in the morning and our last in the evening should be prayer, and even go as far as to posit

that we should strive to offer 100 blessings each day. We have a predetermined service or blessing for almost every situation or moment in time you could imagine. At the same time, prayer necessitates intention and presence, its power comes when it is generated from the heart not just recited from the lips. It is unlikely though that we are able to access that relationship with prayer all the time, or even just during the times when we are here in this space. So how do we go about building a meaningful and effective relationship with prayer?

The thing about prayer, and Jewish prayer in particular, is that it is just really hard. It asks that we simultaneously follow a complex play book while also being spontaneous and authentic. As Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel noted:

There is a specific difficulty of Jewish prayer. There are laws: how to pray, when to pray, what to pray. There are fixed times, fixed ways, fixed texts. On the other hand, prayer is worship of the heart, the outpouring of the soul, a matter of kavanah (intention). Thus, Jewish prayer is guided by two opposite principles: (He says), order and outburst, regularity and spontaneity, uniformity and individuality, law and freedom. These principles are the two poles about which Jewish prayer revolves. Since each of the two moves in the opposite direction, equilibrium can only be maintained if both are of equal force... Our great problem, (he concludes), is how not to let the principle of keva (fixedness) impair the power of kavanah (intention)

Prayer requires that we have both the modesty to stand vulnerable and exposed before God and ourselves, as well as the audacity to speak directly with the divine. In this way prayer necessitates something of a firm humility. Demanding that we are able to

acknowledge the awe-someness of God while simultaneously affirming our own intrinsic abilities to affect change in the world.

Often our desire or need to pray arises in unexpected moments of joy or crisis. Trying to make prayer work in these unpredictable and heightened instants in life can be quite difficult. Like anything else, prayer requires practice. We would be naive to think that in any chance situation we will be able to offer meaningful or effective supplication without first putting in the work to develop a relationship and routine with our own prayer. Regardless of whether one recites directly the prose of the written liturgy or shares simply the words of their heart, each of us has a unique and authentic prayer voice to discover. We need to train our prayer muscles so that we will have the strength to offer powerful prayer at critical times. This is hard. It means coming back to prayer even in the midst of the mundane or at the moments we just don't want to. But if we only pray when the feeling strikes, without cultivating some sense of a prayer practice, when we feel the need to pray, and when the world needs our prayer, our experiences will almost certainly fall short of our expectations.

Beyond simply building a practice, the logistics of prayer are also challenging. How do we know what words to say and when to say them? If we want to pray here in shul, do we have the ability to make it to a morning minyan or even on Shabbat? Not to mention Hebrew. Though I have developed my own skills through my training and experience, Hebrew and liturgical literacy have long been challenges for me, often leaving me feeling insecure and uncertain.

There are of course the more philosophical barriers and questions of authenticity as well. If you're like me, you have probably found yourself sitting in the sanctuary asking: should I really be here, am I doing this right, and do I even believe in the God that I am praying to? The words themselves can be a serious challenge as well. I struggle to rectify my own understanding of God with that of the imagery that the siddur presents. On the one hand, I take comfort in the familiarity of a set liturgy, and love that I can walk in to a synagogue anywhere in the world and know what is happening in the service and even sing along. On the other hand, this fixedness can make the prayers feel impersonal and disconnected from the real world. Descriptions of God as Father, Master, or King, of Judaism as superior, or of other people as abominations can disrupt our relationship with tradition and the divine, and leave prayer feeling empty or meaningless. Our Kol Haneshama siddur provides one type of antidote to some of these problems, but I believe there is something powerful in holding fast to the words of our tradition as well. In working to reconcile my discomfort with the often-archaic imagery and my desire to participate in our tradition's prayer practice, I often focus on the depth of meaning that emerges as a result of the act of prayer rather than the specific words themselves. In doing so I am reminded that while they might not be the words I would choose; these words are endowed with a power far greater than my individual offering and they can teach me about spiritual resilience. For generations in response to excitement and joy, heartbreak and fear, our people have used these words to convey their thanks, to plea for help, and to exclaim their protest. I believe it is possible therefore to graft our own prayers onto the words of those who came before us impregnating them with the needs of this moment. In reciting their words with our

voices, we are able to amplify that which is in our hearts through the echo chamber of our people's history.

One of the things I love most about Jewish prayer is the minyan. In some ways, this feels a bit counter intuitive. Prayer is after all a rather personal experience, and the minyan seems to force us to be together regardless of what is going on in our lives and the world. In fact, while individual prayer is an essential element of our tradition, in our highest and lowest moments Jewish prayer requires us to come together. What I have come to discover is that the minyan allows me to hold the complexity of being human more gently. Regardless of whether my prayers are offered silently or in boisterous song, with agony or rejoice, the minyan lifts me up amplifying my voice and creates a space where my hopes and fears can dwell together.

Over the course of last year, while I was living in Jerusalem the minyan became a focal point in my life. It was a hard year to be away and as I watched a new world that I couldn't really understand unfold I turned to prayer as a source of comfort and strength. For the first time in a long time I had a daily prayer practice and as the year progressed, shacharit, and the morning prayer routine in particular became incredibly important to me.

On Tuesday mornings, I davvened with a very special egalitarian minyan at the kotel. Each week I would get up early and take a beautiful hour long walk across town and in to the old city. On one particularly clear morning in January as I came through the Zion gate and the Arab villages just outside the old city's walls came into focus I found I simply couldn't hold back my tears. I cried as I looked out at a wall that separates two people and thought about the physical and metaphorical walls that are being built throughout human society right now. I cried thinking of the dreamers who are

in fear of being sent back to a place they have never been. For my queer friends and community members whose physical safety is being threatened daily. And for the earth, who has made clear her discontent these past months, and who we all too frequently abandon for the comforts and luxuries of modern living. But I also cried because of the joy I was experiencing in this year of exploration and connection. For the chance to be immersed in a year of learning, the wonder of a first year of marriage, and the excitement of opportunities that lay ahead.

As I entered the minyan that morning I brought with me all the lessons I had learned in those different prayer spaces. I thought back on my meditation training and took time to dwell in the silence, allowing myself to really experience all of what was happening around me, and that had happened in the very place I was standing. I took deep breaths during the silent Amidah and giving myself permission to share a spontaneous prayer like I had learned in those hospital rooms. I offered up my anger and fear right along with my hopes and thanksgiving in a sort of slushy of unfettered thought. As we began pezukey d'zimra I sang out in joy by tapping in to those experiences of joyous prayer I'd had as a kid at camp and the incredible harmonies of the Ugandan Jews. And as I sang the words of psalm 146 I was reminded of my friends at Jonah House, who taught me how to ground myself in prayer and use the liturgy to envision the world I want to live in. "Put no trust in the powerful" we recited together, "God brings justice to the oppressed and provides food for the hungry. The Lord frees the bound and gives sight to the blind. God raises those bowed down and loves the just. Adonai protects the stranger and supports the orphan and widow, and frustrates the designs of the

Ari Witkin

wicked”. That morning prayer came alive for me, simultaneously comforting me in my time of distress and propelling me forward in the work of building a better world.

Every day each of us encounters moments of hardship and joy. We are confronted each morning with the realities of the world as it is and the opportunity to play a part in building the world that can be. Prayer can be an empowering and essential component of this experience of life. Prayer can ground us in the moments when it feels like there is nothing to hold on to, and it can propel us into the world during the times when we feel stuck. And so, it is my hope that tonight each of us can sink deep into our prayers. That we can feel the weight of generations of hopes and dreams on our tongues, that our collective and individual voices will know the power of the prayers that we recite, and that again tomorrow, and the day after that, each of us continues to build a relationship with our unique prayer voice knowing that there is power in our prayers.

Shabbat Shalom.