

I begin with some rabbinical student humor. The celebrated philosopher and social activist Rabbi Abraham Heschel of blessed memory titled his best-known work on Jewish theology *God in Search of Man*. Another of his books, a series of essays and talks on Jewish prayer, was called *Man's Quest for God*., which led to an irreverent quip circulating at the Seminary that Dr. Heschel's next book would be called *Peek-a-boo*.

One of the key ideas expressed in *Man's Quest for God* is the concept of striking a balance in our prayer life between *keva*, the fixed and established elements of Jewish prayer, the externals, as it were, of music and words, and *kavana*, inwardness, concentration, and devotion. *Keva* and *kavana* are the body and soul of Jewish prayer. In a tradition such as ours, in which the words of prayer that we recite are for the most part prescribed by tradition rather than our own original and spontaneous expression, this is an important lesson to remember. Prayer takes place on two levels. Within the space of the sanctuary, there are words being read, sung, and chanted solo or in unison. Within the consciousness of the individual worshiper, the words are absorbed and reflected upon and perhaps take on a personal meaning that relates to his or her circumstances. Sometimes the individual, rather than focusing on the literal meaning of the prayer text, is moved by the words and music and the presence of other worshipers to experience a mood and feeling of genuine prayerfulness. That is the ideal, but as Heschel noted, congregations, while bemoaning the lack of attendance at services, don't seem overly concerned with whether or not congregants who are physically present are spiritually attentive as well.

For Heschel the value of *keva* lies in maintaining a level of spiritual fitness and sensitivity. We won't always feel like praying nor will we always be able to pray with perfect *kavana*, but if we don't pray at all, our spiritual faculties will become like the mechanism of a watch that has rusted because it was not regularly wound. Rabbi Sharon Brous employs a similar metaphor derived from the Hasidic tradition. Praying is like making music for the Sovereign of the Universe, and, whether the music that is performed has been handed down from generations past or is an original creation, the vocalists and instrumentalists still need to practice. The ideal, however, is for the musicians to be "into" their music, to feel a genuine passion and enthusiasm for it, rather than simply going through the motions.

Heschel believed that the purpose of Jewish preaching should be to encourage and enable congregants to pray, so in that spirit I ask us to reflect on the meaning and importance of prayer in our lives. Why should we pray, and why should we do so as part of a community? Yes, I am promoting attendance at Shabbat services, as I invariably do at this time of year, and, in the interests of full disclosure, I admit that I have a personal stake. It enhances my personal religious experience to have more congregants in attendance and participating in the worship. Also, as rabbi, I feel a responsibility for having a *minyan* present on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings for the benefit of those members who have come to say Kaddish. Since the synagogue, along with its functions as a house of assembly and house of study, is a *bet tfilah*, a house of prayer, it certainly falls within the proper role of the rabbi to talk up the importance of worship and especially of *tfilah b'tzibur*, public prayer.

In terms of content, Jews classify prayer as falling into the categories of praise, petition, or thanksgiving. Or, as a blogpost I recently read put it, prayers either say Wow or help!, or thanks. Two of the categories are, each in its own way problematic, and raise questions for us. Starting with praise, does God need us to laud and extol Him? If God is truly all-powerful and all-knowing and if God's Being is sufficient unto itself, needing no enhancement or supplementation from us, to what purpose our prayers? We all like to be praised and commended, but sometimes excessive praise makes even us mortals uncomfortable. And surely, God is not so vain or insecure as to need to hear our tributes to His greatness and awesomeness, His justice and compassion.

Perhaps the answer is that God doesn't need to hear our words of praise but that we need to utter them. The Yiddish writer Isaac Bashevis Singer once wrote that humans are commanded by their religious traditions to direct words of praise to God, so that they don't fall into the trap of offering flattery to mere mortals, to tyrants puffed up with pretension and ego. Our praises are a means of implicitly deflating such pretensions, enabling us to focus on the eternal and transcendent rather than the limited, finite and fallible. We may add nothing to God by our praises but we enhance our own dignity by associating ourselves with the One who alone is worthy of praise. Prayers of praise by connecting us to something infinitely larger than ourselves, with the force and energy that

underlies and imparts unity to the ongoing creation and renewal of the universe, fulfill a yearning that some would claim is built into our very makeup as humans.

Prayer calls attention to the miracles that surround us. However we may conceive of God, prayer makes us aware of our proximity to the sacred. Through prayer we cultivate a sense of awe and wonder as we consider the world around us and our place within it, the beauty we experience, the orderliness we discern, and the unfathomable expanses of space and time. We are in awe as well as we ponder the mysteries of birth, life, and death, of healing and renewal, of friendship and love. When we pray and especially when we praise, when we say *baruch attah Adonai*, we strive to avoid taking all of this for granted. Peak religious experiences may be few and far between. I recall personally the several times I visited Niagara Falls; our trip this summer to Banff and the Canadian Rockies was an equally moving and genuinely spiritual experience. Likewise, being present for the birth of my son and grandchildren and watching the way a child's physical, mental and emotional capacities develop and unfold over the first several years of life filled me with a sense of wonder. But our religious tradition reminds us that miracles are part of daily life, and the most meaningful prayer for me in the liturgy is the *Modim* which makes reference to *nisim*, miracles that are with us every day evening, morning and noontime.

If praise enables us to behold the world and the cycle of life with a sense of wonder, prayers of *hoda'ah*, of thankfulness, fulfill a similar function, in reminding us that the blessings we personally enjoy are not to be taken for granted. In reciting prayers of thanksgiving there is an ethical as well as a spiritual dimension. It is not only the tendency to take the awesome and wondrous for granted that must be overcome but also the sense of personal entitlement and the illusion that we are self-made men and women, the sole authors of our own success and well-being. We are indebted to parents, to teachers and to mentors who provide us with the intellectual, professional, and social skills necessary for us to flourish in later life. We are indebted to the communities in which we reside, which make it possible to support ourselves and our families and enjoy an enriching social and cultural life. And we are the beneficiaries of God's gracious gifts to us – of knowledge, health, and strength; of our world and its resources. We teach our children that it is good manners to write an acknowledgment for a birthday or a Bar or

Bat Mitzvah gift. How much the more so ought we pause to acknowledge the ultimate source of all of our blessings! Indeed, the Rabbis say that when a person eats a meal or snack and neglects to say a *b'racha* beforehand, it is tantamount to theft.

Acknowledgment and gratitude do not end with the recital of a blessing. The prayer serves as a reminder that true thankfulness is manifested by sharing our blessings with those less fortunate, by not squandering the precious resources of earth, air and water that God has given us, and by protecting and preserving them for future generations.

More problematic than either praise or thanksgiving is the prayer of petition, when we ask God for some desired good – health, prosperity, security, deliverance from peril- either for ourselves or in a loved one's behalf. Is God listening to our prayers and, if so, how do we know this to be the case? Is the fulfillment of our desire or the failure to receive what we pray for our means of ascertaining God's answer? Should God not anticipate our needs without our having to articulate them? And how does God decide whose prayer to answer when the earnest and sincere wishes of two equally worthy individuals are in conflict? We might render the questions moot by viewing the purpose of petitionary prayer differently, less the fulfillment of our wishes and more the realization of our dependence on God for all of the things that are important to us. We might also note that since the earliest stages of the development of our faith, we have rejected a belief in magic. God can not be compelled or manipulated into doing our will. There are no guarantees that praying or leading a righteous life will secure us comfort, health or prosperity. And finally we might quell the misgivings of those who are uncomfortable with prayers of petition by pointing to the prevalence of prayers of thanksgiving and praise in the Shabbat liturgy. On Shabbat, prayers of petition are either omitted or relegated to a minor role, because they tend to make us think of what we lack and distract us from the joy and rest of the day.

However, the best answer to the question of petitionary prayer I've come across is to be found in the book *Tough Questions Jews Ask* by Rabbi Ed Feinstein, a volume addressed to post-Bar and Bat Mitzvah students, those bored and disaffected teenagers, who don't see the relevance of Jewish ritual or tradition. Why should we pray? Does God really hear our prayers?, the students asked. After assuring them that it is legitimate within the Jewish tradition to ask questions and raise doubts, Rabbi Feinstein answered

that prayer is not meant to change God but to change ourselves. His answer is based on a discussion by the rabbis of the concept of *tefillat shav*, a prayer uttered in vain. For example, if you are walking in your neighborhood and hear the sound of fire engines approaching, to pray that it be someone else's house that has caught fire is a *tefillat shav*. First of all, you're wishing misfortune on someone else and secondly, you're praying to change something that has already occurred and can't be altered. It is likewise a *tefillat shav*, when a couple is expecting a child, to pray that the baby be of one sex or the other, something that has already been determined. What we are certainly capable of changing is ourselves. If we pray for wisdom to deal with the challenges we face, for strength and courage to confront adversity, for inner peace when we are agitated or distraught, and for the spiritual energies and resources to re-vitalize us when we are downcast, discouraged, or burnt out, what we are praying for is accessible and within our reach, and our prayer can be a life-changing experience.

Rabbi Feinstein discusses as well another important and "tough" question. Granted that we are moved on occasion to express our sense of awe and wonder, that we feel a need and obligation to acknowledge our blessings, and that prayer can change us in meaningful ways, why do we have to pray in a synagogue and in the presence of a congregation? And it is true that some of the most intense spiritual experiences are to be had in solitude or contemplating the wonders of nature rather than in the sanctuary of a church or synagogue. Rabbi Feinstein answers by comparing the experience of watching a baseball or football a game on TV and being at the stadium to see the contest in person. Without a doubt one gets a better view of the play on TV, but the sights and sounds and the excitement of being at the stadium amid the crowds of other spectators enhances the experience of watching the game. I'm not sure how appropriate or on target the analogy is, but it is true, as Rabbi Feinstein claims, that the presence of others does change the quality of the experience of prayer, others who share the same heritage, the same history and destiny, the same concerns. As we contemplate our own needs and concerns during the time of worship, the very presence of fellow congregants reminds us that the human condition is universal, that others have needs too and that we can't focus exclusively on ourselves. To pursue the comparison for a moment: we don't have beer or hot dogs during services and we don't encourage raucous cheering or booing. But we do have

congregational singing (sometimes more spirited than others), the pageantry of the procession with the Torah scroll, interesting discussions on the weekly *parasha*, and a warm sense of community – all features of public worship.

Praying, as we have said, is a discipline. Infusing the same words with passion and meaning, with *kavvana* week after week is a challenge. So too is shutting out distraction – what writers on spirituality describe as the sound track that is continually running within our consciousness – and focusing on yearning, wonder, and gratitude. Even the most pious experience these difficulties, but taking up the challenge is well worth the effort.

Our praying on the Days of Awe comes in concentrated doses – all morning on both days of Rosh Hashanah and all day with just a short break on Yom Kippur. I hope, however, that during the course of the coming year many of you will return, that you will consider not necessarily becoming regulars but at least attending with more frequency – to express awe, wonder, and thanks and to experience community. Prayer, *tefillah*, the High Holiday liturgy reminds us is part of a triad. Along with *teshuvah*, repentance, and *tzedakkah*, charity, it can bring us closer to God and to each other, enriching and uplifting our lives in the New Year. *Shanah tovah*.