

Prayer, Partnership, and Passivity

Parshat Hayyei Sarah 5770

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

There's no shortage of stories about prayer, but one of my favorites is the story of the man who regularly visited the kotel. It seems that he began right the Six Day War and never missed a day in forty two years. When a reporter heard about this, he thought it might make an interesting story, so he asked to interview the man. "Is it true that you've been coming to pray at the kotel for forty two years and never missed a day?"

"It's true," said the eighty year old.

"What do you pray for," asked the reporter?

"I pray for an end to war, peace in the Middle East, and a cure for cancer. I ask God to protect the environment and make sure there are no children who go to be hungry at night," said the old man.

"What is it like praying for such idealistic things? Does God answer your prayers," asked the reporter.

"To tell you the truth, it's like talking to a wall..."

I suspect that there isn't a person here who hasn't felt like the octogenarian in this story at one time or another. As I look around, I see our Shabbat regulars who rarely miss a service as well as many of you who help to maintain our daily minyan. I thank all of you! Our synagogue would not be the same place without you. You devote a significant part of your lives to prayer but I'm sure there are times in synagogue when you feel like you're 'talking to a wall.'

And then there's the *mi sh'berakh*, the prayer for the sick, which we recite each week. Every Shabbat we say the *mi sh'berakh* for those in need of healing – there are names that have been on that list for years and others who are no longer on the list; apparently our *mi sh'berakh* is not as effective as it should be. So what difference does prayer make? Why do we bother praying? Does prayer change anything? Is anyone listening?

Who hasn't asked these questions at one time or another?

But maybe the problem is not with prayer. Maybe it's with God. I don't find very much comfort when someone tells me that 'If God can answer our prayers then God can also say no to our prayers.' That's fine when a child prays for a new bike or a toy but how about a young mother with breast cancer who asks God to allow her to live long enough to see her young child grow up... What does it say about God if God says no to such a prayer?

Maybe the problem is with us. Could it be that we have unrealistic expectations of prayer? The truth is we have no way of measuring the effectiveness of prayer because we're not sure what it is we expect the outcome of our prayers to be. If we expect our prayers to be answered simply because we offered them than our prayers are not prayers; they're magic! When a football player prays before the big game, does he expect God to hand him a victory? Does that mean God did not answer his prayer if his team loses? And what happens if the other team is praying at the same time?

In the movie, the Guns of Navarone, which I saw a very long time ago, there's a scene which made a deep impression on me. On the night before the great invasion, the allies comment that they are certain to win because God is on their side...but then in the very next scene we hear the German's making the very same claim.

What makes for an effective prayer? In our Torah portion, this morning, we have what I believe to be the first recorded prayer in the bible. Although Abraham converses with God on several occasions, we do not have a formal prayer attributed to him in the sense that we pray today. That is, we do not find a prayer with an introduction and petition and a conclusion. The first prayer in the Torah is offered by Abraham's faithful servant who Abraham sent back to his hometown to find a wife for Isaac.

Although Abraham's servant is never identified by name in this story, later tradition assumed that he had to be Eliezer, the head of our forefather's household. As Abraham approached the end of his life, he turned to Eliezer and asked him to carry out one final mission: "Go back to *Aram Nahara'im* and find a suitable wife for my son. Don't allow him to marry one of the local girls, here in Canaan."

So off went Eliezer, not quite sure how he would fulfill his master's final request. This was the original star search!! Upon arriving in *Aram Naharaim*, Eliezer sets up shop in the most logical place to check out the local women, next to a well. As he waits for the girls to show up, Eliezer offers a brief prayer, the first of its kind in the Bible:

"Adonai God of my master Abraham, grant me good fortune this day and deal graciously with my master, Abraham: here I stand by a well as the daughters of the townsmen come to draw water. Let the maiden to whom I say, 'Please lower your jar that I may drink,' and who replies, 'Drink and I will also water your camels,' let her be the one whom you have decreed for Your servant, Isaac. Thereby I will know that You have dealt graciously with my master."

At first glance, it sounds like Eliezer is asking for 'a sign' from God. Abraham's servant asked God to give him 'a sign' that the right girl had come along – not so different the person in Atlantic City or Las Vegas who picks his slot machine after asking God to give him a sign that this is the one that will pay off...

As we look more closely at the story, however, we notice two interesting facts. First, the sign that Eliezer asks for is not a sign at all. It's a test. Eliezer wants to find a girl who is as gracious and as kind as his master. By asking her for some water and having her offer to attend not only to his needs but to the needs of his camels, Eliezer would know that that this is the type of girl he was looking for. And second, Eliezer doesn't leave anything to chance. In the very next passage, we're told that as soon as he finished speaking, 'a beautiful maiden' and immediately ran over to her and asked her for some water.

So I wonder who was doing the choosing here. Eliezer offers a prayer but doesn't leave everything in the hands of God. He takes initiative and directs the search for himself. He picks out the most beautiful girl in the group and possibly chooses her because he can tell even from a distance that she's kind-hearted and sweet. The fact that she turns out to be the daughter of Betuel and a niece of Abraham is a nice coincidence but apparently it doesn't factor into his choice. Even before he knows who she is, Eliezer presents her with gifts of gold and jewelry. More important than lineage is character; Rebecca has already passed the test.

Does Eliezer lack faith in God? He offers a prayer – why doesn't he allow God to answer it? Why doesn't he wait for Rebecca to come to him rather than rushing over to her as soon as he finishes his prayer? It seems to me that prayer is not wishful thinking or a magical act. It's all about partnership. When we pray we invite God to be part of our personal initiatives. We don't ask God to do the impossible or the miraculous but to give us the strength and courage to face life's challenges on our own. Eliezer's prayer comes in a moment of uncertainty and fear – it gives him the ability to act, to step forward, and to make decisions even though he cannot know what the outcome will be. Prayer is not an excuse to remain passive, though there may be times when our prayers teach us how to make peace with the inevitable and the unchangeable.

It's no accident that the first blessing in the middle section of the weekday *Amidah* is a prayer for knowledge.

You graciously endow mortals with intelligence, teaching wisdom and understanding. Grant us knowledge, discernment, and wisdom. Barukh Attah Adonai, who graciously grants intelligence."

Once we recite this blessing there's really nothing else to say; God has given us the intelligence and the imagination to accomplish whatever it is we can realistically accomplish in life. Everything else follows from this prayer. But notice what it says: We don't ask God to make us brilliant or to get an A+ on our test. We

simply say “You’ve given us the ability to think. Thank you God we’ll take it from here!” The measure of prayer is not what God does but how we choose to respond to our own prayers.

Prayer is not an excuse and it is not wishful thinking, though I suspect we all engage in such futile prayers from time to time; Rather prayer is an invitation to enter into a partnership with God in making our lives and the world into a blessing. With each prayer we should ask: what is my role in this endeavor? What can I do? What is expected of me? Prayer alone will never change the world but it might just change who I am and what I do and thereby change the world. Instead of ‘talking to the wall,’ we should be asking ourselves what it is that we are expected to do in the world.

Is prayer boring? Last week there was an op-ed in the Jewish Week: “Needed: an End to Ho-Hum Conservative Services.” Is prayer ‘spiritually empty’ in our Conservative synagogues as this author claimed? There was a great deal of discussion this past week on RAVNET, the computer listserv for Conservative Rabbis, in response to this article. The truth is, the author raises some valid issues about the nature and quality of prayer in the average Conservative synagogue. But he missed the main point. Authentic and meaningful prayer doesn’t happen on the bimah or in the pews. It’s not measured by the quality of the singing or the number of people in attendance. Authentic prayer begins with intellectually honest faith and with a definition of what it is we think prayer should be able to accomplish. If you believe that prayer makes a difference than you’ll engage in prayer. But if your expectations of prayer are magical and unrealistic, why bother? What Conservative Jews need is a realistic vision of what prayer is and can be and how it can change their lives. We need to teach American Jews not only how to pray but why!

So my friends, stop talking to the wall! Real prayer is radical and revolutionary; it demands everything of us. Before you leave synagogue or close your prayer book ask your self how prayer will change your life this week!

There’s a story of a childless couple that came to see their rabbi for a blessing. Month after month they went to their teacher and asked to bless them with a child to no avail. Then one month they saw another couple who desperately wanted a child waiting to see the Rebbe. To their amazement a short time later they heard that the couple was happily awaiting the birth of their first child. Upset and angry they went back to the Rebbe – why had the other couple’s prayer been answered and not theirs. It’s very simply said the Rebbe – immediately after they saw me, they went out and bought a carriage. And you, what are you waiting for?

Prayers are answered when we act. How will our prayers carry us and will we carry them with us in the week ahead?

Shabbat Shalom