

Torah Table Talk – *Pirke Avot*

No Guarantees in Prayer

Parshat Va-etchanan, Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

Parshat Va-etchanan opens with one of the most personal and poignant statements in the Torah attributed to Moses. In the midst of his final discourse, Moses pauses to tell the people how he ‘pleaded with God’ to be allowed to enter the Promised Land but was not granted his deepest desire. The word *Va-etchanan*, “I pleaded,” implies something deeper than a simple, perfunctory, prayer. Moses poured out his heart in the presence of God. The *Midrash* tells us that this word implies, “to throw oneself at the mercy of the other, to plead with no grounds to justify one’s request.” (Devarim Rabbah 2:1)

We can only imagine how disappointed Moses must have been as his career was about to come to an end. Having guided the people of Israel to the shore of the Jordan River, he must have believed that God would relent and allow him to enter the Promised Land. Moses pours out his heart to God only to be told “No.” He can peer across the river but he can not enter the Land of Canaan. His fate would be like that of the nation. Prayer does not change the realities of life and destiny. With this realization, Moses continues his discourse.

Anyone who has spent any amount of time in synagogue has struggled with the subject of prayer. Even when we ‘pour out our heart’ there are no guarantees that we will get the answer we want. Prayer, after all, is not magic. So what does it mean to say that ‘God hears our prayers?’ Why pray if we cannot be assured of our deepest wishes? *Parshat Va-etchanan* begins with Moses’ supplication and continues with the central passage of our liturgy – the *Sh’ma*. It combines the two elements of prayer: the fixed nature of liturgy and the element of heart and feeling. Combining the two is the greatest challenge of meaningful prayer.

Pirke Avot 2:18 Rabbi Shimon said: Be careful when you recite the *Sh’ma* and the *Tefillah* (*Amida*). When you pray, do not make your prayer a prescribed routine but a plea for mercy and grace before God; as it is said: “For God is gracious and merciful, patient and abounding in love, taking pity on evil doers.” (Joel 2:13)

Sources

Babylonian Talmud Berachot 29b

What is meant by [one whose prayer is a] routine? Rabbi Jacob bar Idi said in the name of Rabbi Hoshai: Anyone whose prayer is to him nothing but a heavy burden. The sages said: He who does not say it as one supplicating. Rabbah and Rabbi Joseph both said: He who is unable to bring something fresh into it. Abba bar Avin and Rabbi Hanina bar Avin both said: He who does not make an effort to pray [in the morning and in the evening at the proper time, namely] when the sun appears to stand still.

Rabbi Menachem Becker, Parparot LaTorah

Rabbi Moshe Sofer, the *Hatam Sofer*, commented: we learn from the *Midrash* that Moses pleaded with God 515 times. The gematriah (numerical equivalence) of the word *va-etchanan* is 515. The word *Tefillah* (prayer) also has the numerical value of 515. Thus, when our prayers are combined with the name of God, which is 26 (*yud, hay vav, hay*), together they equal 541 which is the gematriah of the word, Israel. When Israel cleaves to God their prayers are accepted as we learn in our *parshah*, “You who hold fast to the Lord are still alive today.” (Deuteronomy 4:4)

A.J. Heschel

The focus of prayer is not the self. A man may spend hours meditating about himself, or be stirred by the deepest sympathy for his fellow man, and no prayer will come to pass. Prayer comes to pass in a complete turning of the heart toward God, toward His goodness and power. It is the momentary disregard of one’s personal concerns, the absence of self-centered thoughts, which constitute the art of prayer. Feelings become prayer in a moment in which one forgets oneself and becomes aware of God.

Rabbi Harold Schulweis, For Those who Can’t Believe

Why should we bother to pray if God knows everything we want? It seems superfluous to pray to an all knowing good and perfect being. What am I in prayer when God is all, when God resides in a totally other

realm? These questions spring from a master servant model that raises God and lowers humans. Divinity gives, humanity receives. God acts, we react. God wills, judges, rewards, punishes, forgives, hears, responds; we praise and plead. In this vertical mind set, God up there the worshipper down here, the supplicant is dependant on God's goodness and power, either a grateful and trembling recipient of God's grace. The petitioner has little to do beyond asking. In praise or petition it is God who is to be moved.

Where in all this am I, the petitioner? Turn the question around. Do I hear my own prayers? Do I know what I want and where what I want is worthy of being prayed for? Can I myself answer any of my own prayers? Who am I who lifts his voice in prayer to an Other? What are my power and my energy and my will and how may they affect the outcome of my prayers I pronounce? These reflexive questions will not be asked in the conventional prayer model where piety is expressed as a subservience of the self to the divine Other. They will be asked in the covenant prayer model where the petitioner views himself as an active correspondent of God.

The covenant prayer is not modeled according to the relationship of king to subject, or master to servant, or shepherd to flock. Covenantal prayer is a two sided relationship of co-creators and co-sanctifiers. I am not a passive recipient of an Other's will, judgment or act. I understand myself as an essential partner with the Divine Other. Covenantal prayer increases the potency of the Divine Thou, by raising the power and the responsibility of the human partner to answer prayer.

Commentary

There is nothing more difficult or essential to the spiritual life of a Jew than the ability to pray. We not only pray three times a day; we must also recite at least one hundred blessings each day as well. And yet for the modern Jew, prayer is a great challenge. We have great expectations and deep disappointments from prayer. In moments of great crisis we turn to God – but there are no assurances of being granted what it is we desire.

How do we see prayer? Too often in the spiritual life of the average person, this element of plea and supplication is lost in the act of prayer. Because prayer has a very specific structure and form in Judaism, we often fail to focus on the personal and emotional element of prayer. We see prayer as an obligation rather than an outpouring of the heart. The sages emphasized both elements of prayer: there should be an element of routine to our daily prayers but it must also come from our heart. There must be discipline but there must also be passion. This is the essence of Rabbi Shimon's teaching: He challenges us to be precise and disciplined in the recitation of the fixed liturgy but to make sure that our prayers do not become "routine." As Jews we face this challenge every day: how do we combine structure with spirit?

What is it that we seek in prayer? Do we come to God seeking an answer to our requests? Do we seek comfort, enlightenment, or strength? And to whom do we direct our prayers? It's been said that, "The issue of prayer is not prayer; the issue of prayer is God." If American Judaism faces a crisis, it is that we have lost our faith in the efficacy of prayer. As we approach the High Holy Days season, I find myself considering Heschel's words: "Our services are constructed with pomp and precision ...everything is present: decorum, voice, ceremony. But one thing is missing: life...Has the synagogue become a graveyard where prayer is buried? Are we, the spiritual leaders of American Jewry, members of the *hevra kadisha* (burial society)? ...The modern synagogue suffers from a severe cold. Our congregants preserve a respectful distance between the Siddur and themselves... We have developed the habit of praying by proxy."

Questions to Ponder

1. Do you think prayer has become routine because we say the same prayers every time we come to synagogue?
2. How can we make our prayers more meaningful? What can we do as a community and as individuals?
3. How are Heschel and Schulweis different in the way they understand prayer? Which definition is most meaningful to you? How would each respond to Moses' prayer?
4. When you pray what do you ask for?

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