

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN I PRAY?

Kol Nidrei, 2016 / 5777

One of the great privileges in serving as your rabbi here in Montgomery – although at times the term “privilege” might not be precisely the right word – is the opportunity to offer invocations, benedictions and special prayers in all sorts of different circumstances – before religious and civic groups and organizations of all stripes. I’ve been asked to say blessings before football games – may be best team win, with a boost of divine help! – to bless meetings of our city and state government; to pray for God’s help in the work of numerous worthy agencies, and of course to pray for peace as if such prayers will cause some sort of divine shift – a redirection of the laws of the universe because I, rabbi of a small but historic congregation in Montgomery, Alabama, have said the right prayer.

When you think about it, praying is really an act of *chutzpah*. What nerve to think that we are going to persuade God to change the course of the universe just because we say so? Can it really be that praying for sunshine at the picnic will push the rain somewhere else? Or that an ailing person will heal – or not heal – depending upon how fervently we pray, and the words we intone?

The Jewish way of prayer is not magic. The Jewish way of prayer is to judge ourselves, look inward, and struggle to seek an inner sense of direction; our moral compass; our sense of comfort in who we are and the relationships we hold dear. The texts we recite, if our prayers are successful, may not move mountains, but they might move ourselves. If we are moved or comforted or have a new sense of direction and purpose, then we can say that our prayers are answered – and if our worship services can help provide a context for such prayers, then our worship will have served us well.

Prayer is hard work, even when the words come easily to our lips. It’s hard to grapple with our deepest feelings, all too easy to resort to platitudes – the one liners that we sometimes resort to in place of true prayer.

Our sages in generations past knew what it was to grapple with prayer, and what goes into a successful prayer. And they knew that successful prayer is NOT convincing God to heal one person instead of another, or bring us that day of sunshine.

Our rabbinic tradition includes many wise stories about the Jewish approach to prayer – the famed shepherd boy who was unable to speak, though he could whistle – and when he did so one year on Yom Kippur in the synagogue, leaving everyone aghast, the rabbi said that the boy’s prayers were from the heart, and heard by God. Or the farmer, illiterate in Hebrew and unable to decipher the strange letters on the page, who tossed the prayer

book heavenward, and asked God just to select the appropriate prayers and apply it to the farmer's account.

We want our prayers to be effective; we want to know that these holy days have a purpose. What does God want of us?

One way to look at this might be to ask: If we are created in the image of God, then what would God pray for? If being created in the image of God means trying to emulate God's justice and righteousness and fairness, then shouldn't we ask what God might pray for? Wouldn't God's prayers be the perfect model for us?

I am not the first to ask this question. The rabbis of the Talmud, contrary to all our conceptions of the Deity, maintain that God also prays. There is a striking passage in the tractate *B'rachot* [blessings] where we find the following statement: "Said Rabbi Yohanan in the name of Rabbi Yosi: The Holy One, blessed be He, resorts to prayer. How do we know it? Because it is written, "And I shall bring them to My Holy mountain and I shall make them rejoice in My house of Prayer." Note (goes on the Talmud) that the biblical prayer deliberately states "My" house of Prayer, and not "Their" house of prayer. From this we deduce that God also prays."

So what is God's prayer? The Talmudic discussion continues, and cites three specific prayers – and these are so surprisingly ordinary, so unpretentious, and so human that we might at first be disappointed to know what God might actually pray – until you realize that these are among the most sensitive and vulnerable areas where even God encounters occasional obstacles and difficulties. And if the Holy One, Blessed be He, is in need of prayers in these areas, how much more so we – frail and erratic human beings?

The first of God's prayers, as recorded in the Talmud, is this: "May it be My will," the Almighty prays, "to resist wrath and rage. May My compassion conquer My anger."

"Is this the best God can do?" One might ask. But it makes sense: God's wrath led to destruction of the world in days of Noah; destruction of Sodom and Gemorrah; near destruction of Israel after the Golden Calf incident. At the end of the Golden Calf story, God repents: "And the Lord repented over the evil that He contemplated to do."

We, too, know moments of anger whose effects can linger for years. The Talmud warns: "Anger in the home is like a worm in a plant." It corrodes and demoralizes; it spreads fear and alienates friends. A moment of anger may ruin a reputation which was earned over years and decades.

Hillel and Shamai were two of the greatest Mishnaic scholars, but Shamai remains relatively unknown – because he was subject to fits of anger. According to the Mishnah the outstanding characteristic of Hillel is that he was hard to anger, and had wellsprings of patience.

When we learn that God Himself experiences deep regret over His occasional outbursts of anger, and that God prays for added strength to exercise a greater measure of self-control, wouldn't we do well to follow God's example?

God's second prayer is also surprisingly human: "May sentiments of pity permeate My relationships with My children; may mercy and compassion predominate over My other emotions." God prays that when He sits in judgment He should be motivated by tenderness and pity.

There is a great midrashic story of the angels debating with God over whether to create the universe. The angels advised God not to create – because God's judgments would be too stern. The angels only relented when God agreed to rule not just with judgment, but with a full measure of mercy

There's a powerful lesson here: Judaism is a religion of mercy. One name used for God in our liturgy is *Ha-Rachaman* – the All-compassionate One. Even God's throne, in our prayer book, is the "seat of mercy." The art of compassion is one of the core teachings of Judaism, and should be the cornerstone of how we live and how we judge ourselves and the conduct of our lives.

The third prayer is along similar lines, but even more sensitive: May My judgments and decrees be based not on strict laws and justice, and may I always be inclined to give My children the benefit of the doubt." God is praying that He will overlook some of our erratic actions, and resist the tendencies of reprisal and retaliation.

The implication is clear, and deep: Its purpose is to serve as an example for our own meditations and prayers. The Divine meditation is a dramatic reminder to us to cultivate such dispositions and apply them in our daily relationships.

Our society is literally infected with an almost endless variety of mutual antagonisms. We are plagued with national, racial, religious and economic friction. Our daily exchanges are marked by mutual suspicions and distrust. We tend to judge without charity, and we seldom grant someone the benefit of the doubt. We misinterpret innocent mistakes as deliberate attempts to inflict harm, and we are intolerant of shortcomings.

None of us is immune; they are true for many of us. We search for hidden plots and schemes, and question true expressions of idealism and altruism.

An anecdote shows how hard it is to overcome our negativity. Two partners had a prolonged controversy, and finally decided to meet with their rabbi just before the Day of Atonement, to see what they could work out. The rabbi impressed upon them the sacred importance of the season of forgiveness and succeeded in arranging a reconciliation. But the period of peace proved to be short-lived. Before leaving the Rabbi's study, one of the former opponents extended his hand to his companion in a gesture of friendship and said, "I wish you everything that you wish me." To which his associate quickly retorted, "You see, Rabbi, he is starting up all over again."

Mutual suspicion is destructive; it is a vicious cycle from which it becomes ever more difficult to escape. How important it becomes, therefore, for humanity to take to its heart this Divine meditation – "May I always be inclined to give the benefit of the doubt." In human terms, may we be forgiving of our neighbors' errors and may we be deserving of their forgiveness; may we be blessed with the Divine attribute of granting others the benefit of the doubt.

These, then, are the three prayers of God that we are invited to emulate. I have no doubt that living by these three prayers will make the new year a happier one for those around us; I have equally no doubt that it will also be a happier year for each of us.

Amen