

Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote about the massive gulf between sermons and prayer today, and argued that sermons are only meaningful if they serve prayer, and I quote: “Preaching is either an organic part of act of prayer, or *hullin ba-azarah*, profanity in the domain of the sacred... Preach in order to pray... The test of a true sermon is that it can be converted to prayer”¹. My goal this morning is to offer a few words that are not an interruption of our tefillah, but rather are in service of the tefillah. They are by way of introduction to our new siddurim, the Koren Sacks siddurim which we have begun to use this Shabbat. At the end of tefillah, Rav Avi will offer a few words of tribute to Bernie Glickman, in whose memory the siddurim have been donated.

In fact, most of the siddurim you find on our shelves bear dedications. They are given to honor a new birth or to remember a loved one. And that is so appropriate, because prayer marks continuity. It is as permanent and historic as the chain of generations of our people. But there is an irony, too, because as generations change and our identity changes, so do our personal prayers, and even siddurim, change. Prayer must be both fixed, permanent - and fluid, changing. I want to suggest this morning that this is among the central dualities of prayer that we must balance – the dynamic between fixed prayer and fluid prayer.

How can we maintain meaning if we pray the same things every day, every week? But what continuity does prayer have if we make it up fresh every time? And is that even possible, to generate prayers of personal meaning day in and day out?

I mention this tension between fixed and spontaneous prayer at our monthly Kavvanah tefillah on Sunday mornings, which I continue to encourage each of you to try out – the next one is January 15. It is an hour-long Shaharit with a little meditation and melody at the beginning, and then a slow and focused, reflective davening with some singing interspersed – that gives us a chance to hear the prayers of our

¹ “The Spirit of Jewish Prayer”, p. 117, in “Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity”, by AJ Heschel, ed. Susannah Heschel

own hearts while we read the prayers of the siddur – since we're not in any rush. Ok, that's the end of my public service announcement!

But this tension between fixed and spontaneous prayer is highlighted in an unlikely place in this week's parashah, at the end of Yaakov's last conversation with Yosef. Yaakov tells Yosef that he is receiving a double portion in the land, a portion

(בראשית מח/כב) אשר לקחתי מיד האמורי בחרבי ובקשתי
...which I took from the Emorites with my sword and bow. (Gen. 48:22)

The commentaries are puzzled. Does Yaakov ever draw a sword or aim a bow, in the entire narrative of his life? If anything, he is contrasted to Esav, the Bowman and Hunter. The land he takes he buys! His children enact violence in the city of Shekhem – but Yaakov seems ill at ease with their behavior! So what does it mean that Yaakov took this land with his sword and bow?

The commentaries offer about a half-dozen interpretations. Among them is a powerful midrashic reading that takes *herev* – sword – to refer to prayer, as in the rabbinic play on the verse from Psalms 149:

רוממות א-ל בגרונם וחרב פיפיות בידם (תהלים קמט/ו)
The exultant praises of God are in their throats, and the edged sword in their hands. (Ps. 149:6)

– seeming to parallel the praises of God with swords. Then the midrash rereads בקשתי (*b'kashti*) – with my bow, as בקשתי (*bakashati*) – my supplications, my requests. בחרבי ובקשתי – with my prayers and my supplications. So in effect, Yaakov is saying to Yosef, I am bequeathing you something extra, something I was able to acquire above and beyond normal means. The gift of prayer. One commentator even points out that the sword evokes our tongues, and the bow evokes the curvature of our lips – our vehicles for articulating prayer.

So the Sages turn the Torah text on its head to say that Yaakov was not a man of war, but of prayer. He accomplished things in the world not through might, but through expressions of the heart and lips. And that this was in some way something he was trying to pass on as an inheritance to his children, Yosef foremost amongst them.

But the Meshekh Hokhmah takes this one step further, and in doing so, highlights our core tension in prayer. He asks, why do we need these two terms, *herev* and *keshet*? What does each one highlight? He points out that in fact there are two kinds of prayer – what he calls סדר תפילה הקבוע, the fixed, canonical liturgy, and then our personal tefillot based on חידוש, on innovation, on newly expressing what we find in our hearts. He suggests that just as a sword is very sharp and piercing with almost no force, so, too, the fixed words of liturgy have a certain inherent power, almost – independent of how much kavvanah we have when we recite them. But the bow – its strength is dependent entirely on the force we pour into it. So it is with our personal innovated prayers. They depend on really coming from the heart, from a place of searching ourselves and encountering that which is beyond, encountering God. Yaakov was teaching Yosef that we pray in two ways – from the siddur, and from the heart.

I have found in general that there are two kinds of people with regard to prayer, and many of us may find ourselves somewhere in between. There are people who pray what's in the siddur, faithfully and consistently. And in some ways, the more we do that, the harder it gets to pray from the heart. We get used to the rhythms of the siddur. Interspersing our own tefillot, even when we want to, is challenging. It sounds and feels different than the fixed liturgy we are used to, and I sometimes have to convince myself that it is “as good”. Even when I feel limited by the text of the siddur, what words of my own should I choose?

And then you have people who say, “Rabbi, I don't really use the siddur. I don't pray the traditional way. But I am always talking to God. I pray in my own way.” I admire that – a lot. But those people lose out on the words that are sanctified by the centuries and the communities who recite them, words with power and meaning and history and continuity which are lost.

So we are always looking to balance, and it is no simple task. The Shulhan Arukh (Orah Hayyim 119:1) clearly explains how at the end of every petitionary blessing in the Amidah, before the conclusion that leads to the blessing, we can add our own tefillot. But when do we ever take advantage of that?

Enter the Koren siddur. It is really my hope that this siddur will help us blend these opposites – the prayer of the siddur and the prayer of our hearts. As I walked around with the sefer Torah today, I saw people reach out to kiss it, some holding the new Koren, and many holding the Artscroll. Of course, a new siddur is never a simple transition. We are familiar with the Artscroll. It is easy to use and has

beautiful commentary, and the page numbers are emblazoned in our memory – certainly in mine! And it will continue to be available on our shelves for those who wish to use it. We will announce pages in both, giving my arms a workout.

But this siddur is fresh. Its translation is poetic and beautiful, and really gives us a sense of the Hebrew. And many of the prayers are laid out in poetic form, not paragraph form, helping us really notice the structure and meaning of the tefillot, helping us take the prayers in phrase by phrase, fragment by fragment. The commentary is simple and powerful. The opening essay about Jewish prayer is explanatory and outstanding – I really recommend taking time with it. This siddur includes liturgy for celebrating and naming a baby girl, and has our liturgy for Yom Haatzmaut and Yom Yerushalayim, reflective of the values of our Bayit in gender and love of Israel and more. And in its newness, it invites us to consider tefillah anew. You may stumble or notice something you're not used to, as I already have – even the layout of the pages with the English and Hebrew pages reversed gives us pause. It is my hope that that stumbling, those noticings, will awaken a new consideration of the siddur and the tefillah.

This moment of transition for our kahal, for our family, blends the tension in tefillah – the fixed and the spontaneous prayer. The *herev* and the *keshet*. May it help us renew our love of the piercing sword of the canonical liturgy, and may it help us open our hearts to let loose arrows of new personal prayer outwards, upwards, and inwards. Shabbat shalom.