

## Reclaiming Radical Prayer

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“In 1899, the streets of New York City echoed with the voices of newsies, peddling the newspapers of Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst, and other giants of the newspaper world. On every street corner you saw 'em, carrying the banner, bringing you the news for a penny a pape. Poor orphans and run-aways, the newsies were a ragged army, without a leader, until one day when all that changed...”

These are the opening words to one of my all-time favorite movies, *Newsies*. Some of you may be more familiar with the Broadway play of the same name. *Newsies* tells the story of Jack Kelly, a newsboy who prays for a better future, symbolized by the city of Santa Fe, New Mexico. As the story progresses, Jack's prayer for the future pushes him into leading the newsboys and other child workers to rise and create the future they want to live in.

If you can't tell, I love a good story. Whether it is burying my head in a book, watching a play unfold on a stage, or curling up on the couch for a tv mystery, I find myself drawn into the worlds of imagination and history. Every story has the capacity to bring new insights and allows us to reflect on how we interact with the world.

Our tradition makes good use of our stories, punctuating our year with the tales of our history and heritage to bring new lessons to us each time we read them. At the darkest time of the year, we celebrate light with the story of Hanukkah. In the springtime, we celebrate new life with the retelling of the moment of our people's renewal when they left slavery from Egypt. At this time of year, we reflect on our relationship with God through a myriad of stories. The two most famous stories that we read at this time of year are the Binding of Isaac, the Torah

reading for second day Rosh Hashanah, and the story of Jonah, the Haftarah reading on Yom Kippur afternoon. In between those two tales, comes the story of Hannah; a story that is often overlooked, but is the most fascinating story that we read during these Days of Awe.

At first, Hannah's story sounds like many others that we have heard before. Hannah was a barren woman, desperate for a child, much like Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel. Each matriarch had her own approach to handling their pain and heartache, developing schemes or acting out in anger toward their loved ones. Hannah chose a different approach; she took her pain straight to God. Late at night, after the fire of the altar died down to embers, Hannah entered the sanctuary at Shiloh; it was there in the darkness that Hannah poured out her sorrow and pain, filling the sacred space with her silent prayer. Eventually, Hannah's prayer was answered, and she gave birth to Samuel, who grew up to become a great leader of Israel.

In Hannah's time, the actions in the holy sanctuary were highly regulated, sacrifices presided over by a priest with each step described in detail. Everyone knew the precise order of the ritual and the particular role they were to play. The idea of someone going before the altar to pray with the words of a broken heart was a radical one. It was such an eccentric act that, at first, Eli the High Priest thought that Hannah was drunk as she mouthed the words of her prayer.

Centuries later, it was Hannah's spontaneous, radical prayer that became the model of prayer for the ancient rabbis. With the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, the rabbis searched for a way to maintain community and spiritual exercise in a tumultuous time. In the darkness of uncertainty, prayer allowed for the growth of a new form of communicating with God; one not founded upon sacrifices on an altar or priestly ritual but focused on the offerings of the heart.

It is difficult for us to think of the act of prayer as a radical method for interaction with God today. We have spent centuries saying the words of the *Shema*, *V'ahavta*, blessings, and more as a core part of our ritual and religious

lives. Many of us know the basic prayers by heart from the constant repetition of their familiar words and tones.

Given how rote prayer has become, the question becomes: why? Why are we still drawn into this practice? Why do we feel compelled to gather in prayer?

In recent years, scientists have begun to explore the impact that prayer has on the individual. The findings of these studies are intriguing:

One of the key benefits of prayer is its ability to reduce anxiety and stress. By praying, we release the burden of our worries and concerns. Lower levels of anxiety lead to health benefits, such as decreased blood pressure, muscle tension, and other physiological indicators of stress.

Prayer also enhances our overall sense of well-being and mood. When we pray and reinforce our connection with God, we strengthen our sense of purpose and meaning in life. This fosters gratitude and positivity, helping us appreciate the good things in our lives and develop a more optimistic outlook.

The funny thing is, we didn't need scientists to study prayer to discover its benefits. We need look no further than the story of Hannah's prayer or the rabbis' shift toward prayer as the primary modality for creating a connection with God to understand the immense positive impact that prayer can have both on the individual and on the community.

Now that we have answered the question of why we are still drawn to the practice of prayer, we have to address the question of how. How do we bring back that sense of radicalness and infuse it into our prayer practice? The answer to this question lies with each of us individually.

For some, the path forward might be the process of creating something new, adding to the corpus of prayers that we already have. Each generation has added readings, psalms, poetry, and music to reenergize our connection to this ancient practice. How else do you think the siddur became so big?

For some, the path forward might be with the study of prayer, digging into their wording, their origin, attempting to fully understand the words that have allowed Jews to communicate with God for centuries. By discovering the circumstances that brought those earlier generations to prayer, we connect with our history, our own stories of struggle and perseverance.

And still, for others, the path forward might be to fully embrace the silent prayer, that mysterious time when we can speak directly to God. When we allow ourselves to fully engage in this intimate moment, we can pour out our hearts in the same manner as Hannah, sharing our burdens with one who can hold them for us.

Truly, Hannah was a revolutionary. She took charge of her relationship with God, going outside the bounds of the sacrificial system and discovering a deeper connection. Her story inspired the rabbis and subsequent generations with a path forward to connect with God without a Temple, to surge ahead with a new sense of hope and purpose. As we continue to make our way through the High Holidays and into this new year, I hope that these stories inspire each of us to take a hold of our relationships with God, to speak from the depths of our hearts, and to take the next steps to add our own mark on the practice of prayer.