

I Believe in the Power of Prayer...Kinda

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I believe in the power of prayer...kinda.
Let me explain.

Like most people, I think of myself as multi-dimensional. Some people like to use the analogy of an onion with layers, I prefer a prism, multi-faceted if you will. Among those facets are Mystic and Skeptic. Sometimes, there are places where these 2 parts of my being are difficult to reconcile. Prayer is one of those places.

But, before we get into my Mystic vs my Skeptic, we need to define “prayer”. There are different types of prayers. There are spontaneous prayers, like that of Hannah, mother of Shmuel who we just read about in our Haftarah. Hannah poured out her heart to Gd that she be granted her deepest desire, to have a child.

וַתִּתְפַּלֵּל עַל-ה' וּבְכָה תִבְכֶּה

And [Hannah] prayed to the Lord, and wept.

(Samuel 1, 1:10)

This is a type of prayer that many can relate to, but often we only turn to in times of need, as Hannah did.

When inside a synagogue, as we are, the first image that often comes to mind when someone says ‘prayer’ is our siddur, which was primarily composed some 1100 years ago, tends to be highly constructed, poetic language that is at times difficult to follow and even harder to ‘feel’. The V’Ahavta instructs us:

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבַנְיֵי וְדַבַּרְתֶּם בָּם בְּשַׁבָּתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

And you shall teach [the words of the Shema] to your children and speak of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk on the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.

(Deuteronomy 6:7)

This is the prayer that we, as Jews, are supposed to be praying at minimum two,

typically three and sometimes, for good measure, four times a day. These are the prayers that we learn by rote, spending our entire lives trying to decipher, sometimes grasping, sometimes struggling with.

Within each of these, spontaneous prayer and fixed, are different kinds of prayer. Most commonly thought of when speaking of prayer would be those of requests, asking for something. Healing for ourselves, a friend or a loved one perhaps, in need of landing that right job or just making sure that we have food on our tables are all versions of bakashot, asking for something. But Judaism is also filled with shevach and hodaot, prayers of praise and gratitude. Just think of the blessings we say before eating something, or Modeh Ani, the prayer we say upon waking up in the morning.

מודה אני לפניך, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם, שֶׁהַחַיּוֹת בִּי נִשְׁמְתִי בְּחַמְלָה, רַבָּה אֲמוּנָתְךָ

I am thankful before You, Eternal Creator, for restoring my soul to me with compassion. You are faithful beyond measure.

So now that we have some working definitions of some aspects of prayer, what do I mean when I say, “I believe in the power of prayer” and why do I add the caveat “kinda”. I have seen prayer that works. Let’s look at the power of prayer to heal. I do not mean that I believe in the kind of prayer that heals the afflicted with a touch or powerful incantation. I grew up in the Deep South, where every channel on Sunday morning was filled with hours upon hours of evangelical ministries. Some of those had parades of people lined up to be healed by touch. This was very moving and powerful to watch, even through the wires, distance and TV tubes. The Skeptic in me would look askance at the TV and say, “Oh, come on!” in my most sarcastic - why - can’t - you - just - play - cartoons - for - those - who - don’t - watch - TV - on - Saturday sort of way. But the other part of me, the Mystic, to be honest, the Mystic in me wanted to believe that this kind of healing IS possible.

However, when I speak of the healing power of prayer, that is not what I am referring to. We are humans and most humans operate better within a community. Praying for each other helps us stay connected and knowing that others are thinking about us when we are in need can help us recover and bring us back to a healthier place, give us the courage to persevere and in some cases, give us the will to live. I have seen that type of prayer work. My Mystic nods her head knowingly.

Often, one hears about prayer as a way to break open our inner shell, to tear down the barriers we put up against the world, conditioning us to be kinder, softer, and more compassionate. My Skeptic would rather hang out on the couch and watch something

on Netflix rather than try out that kind of experimental, voodoo nonsense. However, unlike the magical healing hands, I have witnessed both in myself and in others the power of prayer to do exactly this; to remind us to be charitable, favorable to others, less judgemental and more willing to believe in the miracle of being alive. I have experienced this both in spontaneous prayer and in fixed, as I walked among the trees of a forest or sat on the side of a mountain, and in the synagogue as I chanted the Amidah. This type of prayer can be very powerful, affecting great change in ourselves and can often lead us to act in ways that have an effect on the world around us. My Mystic smiles a benevolent smile.

Let me share another story. A few years ago I had the opportunity to meet Amma, the hugging Hindu guru. It was a gathering in an ashram somewhere northeast of San Francisco. Hundreds of people sat on the floor of an enormous room, high-vaulted ceiling, exposed rough wooden beams, warmly colored walls, music and chanting. It was all very inviting. And there was a rather long cue to get a hug from Amma, a gentle-looking, brown skinned woman who sat on stage, dressed in white giving out a single, longish embrace to each person who asked for one. My Skeptic was SO triggered. I was in an ashram! I felt like I was in some kind of movie. I had reached new heights of SF Bay Area woowoo (that's what we called it.)

But the Mystic in me was intrigued. I too wanted a hug. Who doesn't love a good hug? There was a catch to the hug, though. I was told that by accepting a hug I would be agreeing to follow Amma's precepts, basically to bring more peace and love into the world. I was certainly on board with that. What could be better? I wasn't actually changing religions or anything, right? It was enough to shut the Skeptic up long enough to get my hug! I still remember that hug. Just after I hugged Amma I was handed a small piece of paper. On it was a Sanskrit chant. I was instructed to chant this several times a day and it would bring me inner peace.

It didn't. I tacked that piece of paper onto my bedroom mirror and for weeks tried to find a way to say it. It didn't work. I simply didn't feel inner peace. What I felt was more anxiety, yet another place where I could and clearly would fail. What had I done? "Aha!" the Skeptic triumphantly cried. "Prayer in any language is worthless!"

But my Mystic took another approach. My Mystic reminded me that Amma was not actually in my walls watching me, I could put my guilt aside and I could accept the gift that she had given me, the gift of small prayers. I could morph her instructions 'to regularly chant the Sanskrit' into 'to regularly chant *something*.' I chose the Shema. I would chant this one line over and over and, interestingly enough, it did bring me some sense of peace. This was my first tefillah/prayer practice.

From this experience, I took away some very important lessons that have stuck with me. First off, I don't have to understand every word of what I am saying, but, on some level, my prayer needs to speak to my heart and soul. I need to be able to connect. Using the Shema, a Hebrew phrase that I had a long relationship with helped to connect the words to my soul.

Second, praying the same words over and over, whether it is a short chant or longer paragraphs, having the familiarity on the tongue can help to clear the mind of the clutter of thoughts that are constantly bombarding our brains, to give space for expansion, either just to simply exist in peace or to have greater thoughts than "What am I going to make for dinner tonight?" Many meditative practices employ this technique of a chant or a mantra, be it short, like the Shema or long sections of text, like the Amidah, to help our minds focus, help calm our breathing and bring us a sense of clarity.

The Skeptic points out that it would be lovely to sit all the time in what Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel refers to as "Radical Amazement," that state of being where the world around glitters with the iridescent miracle of existence. But some of us have real lives. If you think that all a rabbi does is sit around learning, meditating and praying, we need to talk. Life has a tendency to dull the sheer radiance of the world that surrounds us. Worries about the environment, politics, economy, concerns about friends, family and our own well being all collide unpleasantly with the bliss of experiencing continuous creation visible right before our very eyes.

But, the Mystic reminds us that, as Heschel rightly points out, prayer is designed to bump us back into that space of radical amazement, or at the very least, an awareness, to make us stop, wipe the fog out of our eyes, and to recognize that the world we are living in is a miracle.

Which brings me to the third thing I learned from that experience with Amma. Prayer is a practice. If I want to get something out of prayer, then I have to actually pray. If I want to get good at it and have the experience of prayer clearing my mind and opening my soul, then I have to actually practice.

All of us are innately good at something. I happen to be good with my hands and can easily build things. During the pandemic that looked like a lot of lego sets presumptively for my daughter. However, I cannot play the guitar. I have tried on and off for about 30 years. Playing the guitar is a life goal of mine. One of the things that the pandemic afforded me was a little more time just sitting around my house. As it

happened, there was a guitar sitting right next to me. So I practised and lo, I got better. Ok, I am not great, but I am better than I have ever been for my 30 years of effort. Bottom line, if I don't practice, I not only won't but can't get better.

This is true for tefillah as well. We may all encounter moments where we effortlessly connect to our prayers. You may be someone who is innately good at prayer and it comes easily for you. However, for me, and I suspect for some of you, to have prayer be effective then it takes dedicating time, effort and energy. What I get out of my tefillah directly correlates to the amount of energy I put into it.

There is a passage in the Psikta D'Rav Kahana, a collection of midrash composed sometime around 500 C.E. that reads:

Gd says to Israel: I asked you to pray in the synagogue in your city, but if you cannot pray there, pray in your field, and if you cannot pray there, pray in your bed, and if you cannot pray there, then meditate in your heart...and be still.
(158A)

The midrash is encouraging each of us to find a way to pray that suits who we are and where we are in our lives. There are a variety of ways in which prayer can manifest for us, but it will not manifest, it will continue to be beyond our grasp if we do not attempt to pray.

The Skeptic says, "See? Prayer is hard! It isn't magic and it doesn't just fix things. If it isn't magic, then I would much rather sit and watch something, anything! Just don't wake me up for minyan!"

But the Mystic, which may at first seem more naive and innocent, who is, in reality, wiser and can tap into the ancient flowing current of knowledge of the universe counters and says, "Yes, Skeptic, a prayer practice is a practice and it can be hard, but it works. You know it does. Prayer is good for you. It calms your mind. It slows down the world enough for you to recognize that just the very fact that you are living and breathing is a miracle. It centers you, helps you feel better and makes you a better person. Now get off your butt and go practice!"