

And Isaac Prayed – Shabbat Toledot 5782

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Maybe we “know too much about how the world works. Maybe we don’t know enough Hebrew or liturgy. Maybe we’ve been disappointed too many times. Maybe we just have better things to do, or we’ve found other ways to connect with God and the community. Whatever the reason, the facts are inescapable. Jews are the least prayerful of any religious group in America.

I found the numbers on the internet, so they must be true: 62% of **affiliated** Christians claim to attend services at least once or twice per month, while only 29% of affiliated Jews claim the same. 68% of affiliated Christians say they pray at least daily; 7% say they seldom or never pray. 69% of Muslims pray at least daily and 13% rarely pray. Among Jews, 29% pray daily, 24% pray weekly or monthly, and **45%** (and these are among the *affiliated*) say prayer is seldom or never part of their lives. The numbers vary widely between Orthodox, Reform, secular, evangelical, mainline, Black, and White, but the contrasts are stark.

And we don’t need the statistics because we all know. Even among the people who **attend**. ... I don’t want to put people on the spot, so don’t raise your hands, but how many of us actually **prayed** this morning. (Showing up to celebrate a bat mitzvah, or see a friend, or enjoy kiddush is great; but I’m talking about *praying*.) We had this discussion when the pandemic began and we were deciding if it was right to Zoom on Shabbat. Part of me wanted to tell people to just pray at home so we wouldn’t have to fiddle with the electronics on Shabbat. But who prays at home?

There are lots of reasons, but today I want to ask the question: can we aspire to pray more? The fixed liturgy, spontaneous prayer, I don’t want to be particular; can we benefit from using more God language, giving thanks more often, invoking God when facing life’s challenges and road blocks?

The Torah doesn’t say a lot about Isaac. Parashat Toledot began with “*Toledot Yitzhak, The Story of Isaac*,” but it moves quickly to Jacob and Esau. But what the Torah does say about Isaac is telling. “Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebecca. ויעתר יצחק לה' לנכח אשתו, And Isaac pleaded – he prayed with great intensity, says Rashi – on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebecca conceived.”

This is significant because there are other barren women in the Bible, and none of their husbands pray for them. Abraham never prays for Sarah to have a child. Jacob is downright hostile when his wife cries out in agony. “Jacob was incensed at Rachel,” we read, “and said, ‘התחת אלהים אנכי, Can I take the place of God, who has denied you the fruit of your womb?’” Elkana, the husband of Hannah in the book of Samuel does the same thing: “Hannah,” he asks, “Why are you crying and why are you not eating? Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?”

It didn't help that Jacob and Elkanah already had children from rival wives. Where's the empathy? I've been through it. Watching your peers get pregnant, hearing them complain about how terrible pregnancy is when all you want is to be able to experience that misery. And being told you should just get over it?!? Men and women experience that pain differently; and Jacob and Elkanah don't just fail the Empathy Test. They fail the Prayer Test.

But not Isaac. "Isaac prayed fervently on Rebecca's behalf, and God answered the prayer, and Rebecca conceived." For those who think praying was easy for Isaac, that perhaps God answered more prayers back then, or that the patriarchs had a more direct line, I point to a phrase five verses later: "Isaac was 60 years old when [the twins] were born." It took 20 years! Isaac didn't just pray and ... *voila!* He prayed and prayed, and suffered and maintained faith, and prayed some more. We don't do that anymore. But can we aspire to that kind of faith? If we could learn how to do it, might prayer bring us the same sense of contentment that it apparently brought to Isaac?

Maybe we "know" too much. On Tuesday night, I was discussing with my 7th grade class why bad things happen to good people, and I threw out the idea that maybe God isn't the source of the evils we experience. Maybe God can't or doesn't control these things. Maybe they just happen. And one of the students – and remember, he's only 12 – commented: You've just given the argument for how the world can exist without God. (I'm paraphrasing, and I hope I said it right; Alexa, you were there! But...)

Maybe we don't pray because we "know" God doesn't work like that. Prayer doesn't heal. Science heals. Medicine heals (although that doesn't always work either). If we don't believe God "answers" prayer like that, if we know words can't change the natural world, why bother? What can we hope to get out of the prayer experience?

You've probably heard the one about the guy who was driving through Manhattan in search of a parking space. He prays to God. "I promise, if you just do me this one favor, I'll take You more seriously. I will put on tefillin. I will go to services. I will give tzedakah." And just then he finds a spot, and he looks again to the heavens. "Never mind, God," he says. "I just found one."

What can we hope to get out of prayer? For me, it's about connection. The person on whose behalf we are praying should know they are not alone. That was the power of Isaac's prayer. He felt Rebecca's pain and determined to share it with her. He didn't push back. He didn't tell her to get over it. He joined her plight and prayed to show Rebecca – as much as God – how he felt. It has taken me time to understand, and I'm still on a prayer continuum, but I've seen the effect when someone tells me they are having surgery or going through treatment and I say I'm going to include them in my prayers. I can't change things. I can't make the disease go away. But I can share a little piece of the anxiety or pain.

And across generations. When I say, "מי שברך אבותנו, May the One who blessed my ancestors ... also bless you," I am creating a connection to those very human role models who came before us. I'm not the first to experience pain, or doubt, or the seemingly unbridgeable divide between the world as it is and the world as it should be. I'm not alone, and maybe I can learn to emulate their faith, their hopes, their optimism about the possibilities for a different future.

Or God. When I express my doubts, does that mean I don't believe in God, or does it mean I don't believe in *that* kind of God? Faith/prayer does not have to work in binaries of true and false or power vs. impotence. The starting point is that there is something else beyond me, but my relationship to that Something can be a process, an aspiration, a journey.

There are other challenges with prayer. How can prayers be meaningful or authentic if it is preordained by commandment what to say and when to say it? The fixed liturgy in a language many don't understand does not always say what is really on our minds. Of course, it can be difficult the other way, too. It isn't easy to pray if I have to come up with the words all on my own. The fixed liturgy is a starting point; but prayer is a spiritual *practice*; it requires practice.

There are different types. Sometimes we ask for things – *bakashah*. Sometimes we pray to express gratitude – *hodayyah*. Sometimes we pray just to praise God – *shevah* – to humbly acknowledge that the world, the universe, the Power Supply is so much bigger than ... me.

But the bottom line is that if there is any hope for finding meaning in worship, we must be willing to follow Isaac's example and try. "ויעתר יצחק, Isaac pleaded [and pleaded and prayed and pleaded] with God," and because he maintained faith, because he kept Rebecca's needs on the forefront of his consciousness, "ויעתר לו ה", he felt as though his prayers had been answered when the Lord responded and Rebecca conceived." Shabbat shalom.