

WHY?...Thinking Jewish

20th/21st Century American Jewish Theology

Asking the Questions No One can Answer

Explore the meaning of God's existence, the insight of Revelation at Sinai, the purpose of our Creation and how we might bring about Redemption from modern/post-modern theological systems...Consider how asking WHY makes us WHO we are

The Spirit of Jewish Prayer

Session VI

Rabbi ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL...

...We do not refuse to pray. We merely feel tongue tied, our mind inert, our inner vision dim...We do not refuse to pray; we abstain from it. We ring the hollow bell of selfishness, rather than absorb the stillness that surrounds the world...Futile self-indulgence brings us out of tune with the gentle song of nature's waiting, of mankind's striving for salvation...We dwell on the edge of mystery and ignore it, wasting our souls, risking our stake in God...Our mind has ceased to be sensitive to the wonder. Deprived of the power of devotion to what is more important than our individual fate, steeped in passionate anxiety to survive, we lose sight of what fate is, of what living is...

...To pray is to take notice of the wonder, to regain a sense of the mystery that animates all beings, the divine margin in all attainments. Prayer is our humble answer to the inconceivable surprise of living...Amid the meditation of mountains, the humility of flowers...suddenly we feel ashamed of our clashes and complaints in the face of the tacit greatness...It is so embarrassing to live!...Only one response can maintain us: gratefulness for witnessing the wonder...

...Prayer takes the mind out of the narrowness of self-interest and enables us to see the world in the mirror of the holy...We do not step out of the world when we pray, we merely see the world in a different setting...Prayer clarifies our hopes and intentions. It helps us discover our true aspirations, the pangs we ignore, the longings we forget. It is an act of self-purification, a quarantine for the soul. It gives us the opportunity to be honest, to say what we believe, and to stand for what we say...Prayer teaches us what to aspire for...Prayer implants within us the ideals we ought to cherish.

...However, prayer is no panacea, no substitute for action. It is, rather, like a beam thrown from a flashlight before us into the darkness. It is in that light that we grope, stumble, and climb to discover where we stand, what surrounds us, and the course which we should choose. Prayer makes visible the right and reveals the false. In its radiance we behold the worth of our efforts, the range of our hopes, and the meaning

of our deeds. Envy and fear, despair and resentment, anguish and grief, which lie heavily upon the heart, are dispelled by its light.

And sometimes prayer is more than a light before us; it is a light within us. Those who have once been resplendent with this light find little meaning in speculations about the efficacy of prayer. A story is told about a rabbi who once entered heaven in a dream. He was permitted to approach the temple in paradise where the great sages of the Talmud were spending their eternal lives. He saw that they were just sitting around tables studying the Talmud. The disappointed rabbi wondered: "Is this all there is to Paradise?" But suddenly he heard a Voice, "You are mistaken. The sages are not in Paradise. Paradise is in the sages."

Rabbi HAROLD SCHULWEIS...

Conventional petitionary prayer reflects conventional theodicy and all its flaws. So, as Schulweis inverts theology, he inverts prayer. Predicate prayer is not directed toward a Divine Subject. Predicate prayer celebrates God within. Prayer is reflexive. Prayer is not directed above to the God who heals but within—affirming the divinity of healing and caring, awakening our resolve to help. The purpose of prayer is to locate and rouse the God within and among human beings and stir a response.

"Prayer is not magic...Prayer is no surrogate for our work in the world. Predicate prayer is reflexive in the sense that nothing can be asked another without calling upon the labor of one's own energies...One cannot praise God with arms folded." ...Nothing defeats prayer more than our feeling superfluous. You can wrap yourself in a tallit...but if you are not essential to the prayer you utter, you're just turning a prayer wheel, and you feel like a "fifth wheel." And when you feel irrelevant, God is irrelevant." [In Pursuit of Godliness, pgs. 168-170]

The Purpose of Jewish Prayer

Prayer changes and affects the person who prays because prayer opens the heart. Prayer lets down the barriers between our intimate longings, our private pain, our anxious clutching fears, and everything else.

Rabbi Sheryl Lewart

All prayer, when we pay attention, whether personal or liturgical, is ultimately a form of speaking the truth. It makes us aware of what is going on in our lives so that we can see clearly and respond appropriately.

Rabbi Jonathan Slater

What prayer means to me is turning myself so that I'm no longer the center of the story. I'm reminded of that kid's book, Zoom, where you start out looking at a farmhouse, and

then you go back and see that it is really a picture on a wall in a room, and then you go back further and see that the room is in a house, and further and further until eventually, you are seeing from God's perspective. At my best, prayer is about getting out of my own way and, as much as possible, trying to see the world for that moment, through the metaphoric "eyes of God."

Rabbi Laura Geller

I don't pray to God with my prayers. I experience God through my prayers, with my community. When my voice is joining with other voices, I experience God through that moment. I am not praying to God for something to happen, because it already did.

Rabbi Jamie Korngold

Prayer isn't only comforting, its also disturbing. It can stir up parts of you that are more comfortable left dormant, and that's not always easy. I think one of the reasons to shy away from prayer is that you don't want to hear that part of you that prayer brings out.

Rabbi David Wolpe

I think prayer helps us cultivate an open heart because it blurs the lines between us. My father is an artist, and he used to teach me that the difference between a good painting and a great painting is always in the lines. In a great painting, the lines breathe. I think that when we pray, we allow our lines to breathe, so that you are a little bit of me and I am a little bit of you, and we are all a little bit of God.

Rabbi Zoe Klein

I would have a big problem if I took "Baruch Ata" literally. When I say "Blessed are you who heals the sick," I translate it for myself as "I'm so grateful that there is healing in the world and that I can be part of it." I am aware that redemption happens every day. Every time I say "Baruch Ata," it's an expression of gratitude that opens up doors, reminding me of the larger things I'm supposed to be grateful for, lest I have forgotten

Cantor Ellen Dreskin

Prayer has the power to lift us up, and it also has the power to settle us down when we're feeling lost, untethered, panicked...Prayer on a regular basis offers us the opportunity to reconnect with God, our people, our souls, in a way that anchors us. ...Even a short period of prayer in the morning can change the way you experience the day. And a short period of prayer at night can change the way you face the darkness.

Rabbi Naomi Levy

The path that we walk is one of co-creative partnership with God. So prayer for me is really the process of keeping myself aware of that truth, conscious of my responsibility. And constantly bringing myself back into alignment with the divine purpose.

Rabbi Nadya Gross

Rabbi LARRY KUSHNER...

Rabbi Dov Baer, the great storyteller of Mezritch, used to say that a person is like a shofar! A shofar sounds only when breath is blown through it; we can only say prayers because God moves through us.

Like God, the prayers are everywhere, but they need mouths and hands to give them melody and movement. Without us, they would flow unnoticed through the universe. People are the instruments that transform prayers into music and words.

The Book of Psalms is our biggest and oldest collection of prayer-poems. Its words, like the words of other prayers in our prayer book, are a script or a musical score for words and songs that already exist in each of us and within all creation. One psalm verse for example reads: “How awesome is what You do, God; You have made everything with wisdom; the earth is full of Your creations.” [104:24] These words, recited for generations, are already in the universe, whether or not we say them. If we say them, however, we understand a little more about the mystery of being alive.

Sometimes the prayers seem to come from our own heart; other times we find them written in the prayer book; still other times they seem to be whispered by the wind. But no matter where we find them, the words of prayer are already present. They need someone to speak them. By giving them a voice, we come closer to God.

Rabbi Kalonymos Kalmish Shapiro, who died in the Warsaw Ghetto, taught that “not only does God hear our prayers but God also says our prayers through us as well.” God’s words become ours.

Prayers connect us to God, and, since God is also connected to everything else, prayer joins us to all creation. Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the great spiritual teachers of our generation, explained that “in prayer, we realize that our self is not the hub, but the spoke of a revolving wheel.” Such a feeling is so important that our spirits can’t live without it.

The Book of Miracles: A Young Person’s Guide to Spirituality, pgs. 71-73, L.Kushner

