

# Turning Pro in Prayer

Lekh Lekha 5779

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## I.

OF ALL THE INNOVATIONS we ascribe to Avraham, the greatest is prayer. Avraham, we believe, created Shacharit. This is the meaning of a verse we will read next week, וַיִּשְׁכֶם אַבְרָהָם בְּבֵקֶר אֶל־הַמִּקְוֶה, אֶשְׁר־עָמַד שָׁם אֶת־פְּנֵי ה' – “Next morning, Avraham hurried to the place where he stood before God” (Gen. 19:27). As explained by R. Yossi b. R. Chaninah in Masekhet Berakhot (26b), אין עמידה אלא תפלה, “the word ‘standing’ means nothing other than prayer.” The Torah, in other words, tells us that Avraham went back to pray once again the next morning – and thus created Shacharit.

And our other forefathers gave us the other *tefillot*. R. Yossi continues and analyses moments in which Yitzchak and Yaakov engaged in prayer, thus concluding that they created Mincha and Maariv respectively. As captured by the *gemara*: תפלות אבות תקנום, “the forefathers instituted our prayers.”

But there is an alternative claim: תפלות כנגד תמידין תקנום, “our prayers were instituted to parallel the daily offerings [in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*].” This view, too, has its prooftexts and arguments. And so, we’re left with two opposing views of prayer: it was a creation of our *Avot*, forefathers, or that it mirrors – and now replaces – the offerings in the Temple.

But these aren’t just two different views. I realized last week that there is a lot at stake depending on which view we accept. The very essence of Judaism, the very meaning and purpose of our prayer changes depending on why we do it. And I want to argue today that there is only one perspective we should adopt.

## II.

Last year I heard an explanation of the difference in these views that really struck me. It was in the name of Rabbi Yaakov Magen and had been heard by my *rebbe*, Rabbi Jeremy Wieder when he was at YU. I’m paraphrasing and adapting it slightly, but, essentially, the two different views on prayer are two different paradigms. The forefathers represent spontaneous prayer. When we are consumed by a spiritual longing to reach out to God, when the need to turn to God arises, we follow the path first charted by our forefathers and pray. But, on all other times, when our motivation to pray does not come from our spiritual longing but our sense of obligation, then we are following the other paradigm. Just as the *korbanot* required sacrificing every day regardless of the mood the Kohen was in, so, too, must we daven regardless of our mood. Our davening mirrors the service in the *Beit ha-Mikdash*, the *avodah*, which very literally means “the job.” There was a job to be done in the *Beit ha-Mikdash* and there is a job to be done in *shul*, and so we just get it done.

It’s not hard to decide which one is more compelling. Would we rather be Avraham reaching out to God in prayer and protest, communicating with the divine? Or a Kohen on a cold, frosty morning, slitting the throat of a animal covering our hands in blood? Which paradigm of prayer sounds

more appealing? Avraham. The *Avot*, right? No. Not at all. I think it's the worst way possible to think of davening.

### III.

A few weeks ago, during *Tashlikh*, I was telling some people about an author who, without realizing it, wrote some of the best books on *teshuva* and our purpose as Jews: Steven Pressfield. Steven Pressfield is, primarily, a fiction writer – his best-known work is *The Legend of Bagger Vance* – but he also writes a lot on the creative process and the challenges faced when attempting to improve oneself. He's a bit of a wacky dude. Some of his writings on this subject are a bit trippy, but his book *The War of Art* captures, better than anything else I have ever read, the confrontation with our *yetzer hara*, our evil inclination, though he terms it "Resistance."

But it's another one of his works I want to highlight because I think it unknowingly expresses how we should relate to davening and, more broadly, our entire Judaism: *Turning Pro*. Pressfield has a simple thesis: too many people live their lives as amateurs; what they need to do is become professionals.

And the best example of this is found in creative fields. Amateurs can only write (or whatever else they're trying to do) when inspiration hits. They need the perfect environment, mood, and moment – and the second they falter they stop. The professional, though, to quote Pressfield, "does not wait for inspiration; he acts in anticipation of it. He knows that when the Muse sees him sat in his chair, she will deliver."

And if you look at some of the most successful writers and creatives you see the same pattern emerging: routine. Mundanity. But from that routine inspiration sprouts. From that mundanity creativity emerges. Sir Terry Pratchett, one of my favorite authors, wrote some of the most brilliant and creative books – his *Discworld* series – sat in the same chair at the same time every day writing the same number of words: four-hundred every day. So much so that, famously, to quote his friend and sometimes co-author Neil Gaiman, "[when] he finished a novel with a hundred words still to go, he put a piece of paper into his typewriter, and wrote a hundred words of the next novel."

No matter where you look, the most creative people are those who do the same mundane routine thing every day. They are pros. As put by Pressfield, "the professional shows up every day. The professional stays on the job all day." Inspiration does not come from thin air only when the moment strikes, it comes from a boring, formulaic routine that, done frequently enough, yields brilliance.

### IV.

There are few critiques of Orthodoxy that are as popular as the one that concerns how we pray. Why is it always so rushed? In a language we aren't truly familiar with? How can anyone find meaning in a 30-minute morning Shacharit? Is this how we think we should speak to God? Is this how we believe we find spirituality?

Yes. Because we aren't wanting to be amateurs, we're striving to be pros. As God tells us, we will be a *mamleket kohanim ve-goy kadosh*, "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Ex. 19:6). What does it mean for us all to be a kingdom of priests when only some of us are actually *kohanim*?

It's simple. The *kohanim* served God, not out of inspiration but because it was their job. They were the pros – the professional servers of God. But the truth is that we are all commanded to be a *mamleket kohanim*, we all must be *kohanim*. We have to turn pro in our Judaism.

You won't find spirituality in the odd moment here or odd moment there in which you go looking. You won't find *davening* meaningful if you only do it when the mood strikes you. That's not how spirituality works. Spirituality, like creativity, is found in the mundane. In the routine. In the commitment. Every morning, afternoon, and night, like clockwork, we are commanded to recite the same words, use the same formula in talking to God. And therein lies the key to spirituality. True inspiration doesn't lie in a once-a-month recital of a 15-minute *Amidah*. It's found in the three-times-daily recitation of it, even when it's done as quickly as possible.

The difference between a professional and an amateur writer is that the amateur thinks they need to be inspired and that they need several hours at a stretch to write. But the professional knows that 30 minutes a day every day at 8 AM is enough to write a masterpiece.

The difference between a professional and an amateur prayer is that the amateur thinks that they need to be inspired and that they need as much time as possible. But the professional knows that 30 minutes a day every day at 6:30 AM of rushed-through davening while half-asleep – and then another 30 at night – is enough to storm the gates of heaven.

Of all the innovations we ascribe to Avraham, the greatest is prayer. Avraham, we believe, created Shacharit. Yitzchak gave us Mincha, and Yaakov Maariv. But they never did so out of obligation. They were amateurs, not pros. We learn so much from them but not this. We look to the *kohanim* – the people we are commanded to embody – who didn't wait for inspiration. The people who did their job. Who turned up every day. Because they were the pros. And so should we be, too.