

An Introduction to Prayer by Rabbi A. Z. Saunders

Fundamentals of Tefillah

The word “tefillah” does not mean prayer. Prayer can be the translation of *bakasha*, which usually means “request.” *Tefillah* means judging. This means that *tefillah* is a series of statements which we say regularly by which we are meant to apply them to ourselves and judge whether our behavior agrees with the truth of those statements. For example, the forth blessing in the *Amidah* starts with the words, “You give knowledge to man.” Therefore, we need to acknowledge and believe that all knowledge and brainpower comes as a gift from G-d. We also say in the second blessing of maariv- ‘Blessed are you Hashem who loves the Jews’- Do we believe G-d loves us. How amazing is that!

Why do we daven?

Since Hashem is totally good and wants to do good to his creatures, why do we need to ask him for what we want? Surely if it is good for us He will provide it. If it is bad for us, He will deny it. One of the answers is that most of what we pray for is neutral, neither good nor bad. G-d is waiting to see how much it means to us and how much we believe it comes from Him as to whether he grants us our wish or not¹.

There is another fundamental idea in why we *daven*. Let us first examine the first instance of prayer in the Torah. In Genesis chapter 18 verse 17, G-d says to himself, “Shall I conceal from Abraham what I shall do?” The rabbis explain that what G-d meant was that he wanted to give Abraham the chance to pray on behalf of

¹ Based on a shiur by Rabbi Jeremy Stanton when I was in school (1996).

the people of Sodom. The obvious question is, we see clearly from the ensuing verses that Abraham's prayers were not in the least bit successful. Not even one extra person from Sodom was spared (excluding Lot who was going to be spared anyway). Why was G-d wasting his time?

We can answer this with a verse from Proverbs chapter 15 verse 8: "A sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to Hashem; the prayer of the upright is his delight." The Malbim explains, "The Almighty primarily desires the honest outpouring of the heart, yearning for him. Without this, the most lavish sacrifice is abominable; with it, simple prayer is sufficient even without sacrifice." We can see from here that G-d wants people to pray even if they are unsuccessful as he gains tremendous satisfaction from it. This is why the Matriarchs had to wait many years for children in order that they should pray.

The rabbis take this point a bit further. It is not just that G-d enjoys our prayers. It is that G-d wants us to feel close to him in our prayers. When somebody is seriously ill in hospital and he opens his heart to pray to G-d, he feels a sense of closeness to G-d through his prayer. Therefore, prayer is more for us to develop our bond with G-d rather than for G-d himself. We as Jews should feel privileged that G-d has chosen us and allowed us to get close to him. This is the meaning of acceptance of suffering, which is mentioned in Ethics of the Fathers chapter 6 mishna 6. Through our problems and challenges, we can grow closer to G-d.

The prayers we have today are instead of the sacrifices. The Hebrew word for "sacrifice" is *korban* (קָרְבָּן) has the same letters as *karov* (קָרוֹב), which means "close." So we can see the idea that making a sacrifice is a means of coming close to G-d.

How to pray

The rabbis refer to prayer as the “work of the heart.” As it says in the Shema prayer, “Serve G-d with all your heart.” The most important organ in prayer is one’s heart, not one’s lips. This means one should try and understand what he is saying and put some feeling and emotions into one’s prayers. We can understand this very easily with the example of a beggar asking for money. If he asks in a drone and lacks any emotion or feeling, we are less inclined to give him money than if he were to beg with all his heart and feeling. This is one of the ideas of why we blow the shofar. It represents somebody who cannot talk to G-d himself. It is the sign of someone who cannot formulate words to G-d but rather he cries out to Him.

This idea can be compared to a prince who leaves the palace to travel around the world. After he’s run out of food, money, and clothing he returns home. However, no one in the town recognizes him. He approaches the palace gates, and the guards do not grant him access. In fact, he has been away for so long that he has forgotten his native language and cannot communicate. Eventually, he becomes so frustrated that he bellows out a cry of incredible anguish. His father, the king, hears his cry and immediately recognizes the voice. He joyously welcomes his son back home. This is parallel to our communication to Hashem on Rosh Hashanah and the prince’s cry is like the shofar blast. No matter how far we have strayed or how much we’ve changed, once we come back to our Heavenly Father, the King of Kings, and cry out to him, he unconditionally accepts us without delay.

The rabbis inform us that when one recites the Amidah he is actually standing in the heavenly palace in front of G-d. This is why we stand with our feet together like the angels. We need to take this one-on-one session with G-d seriously and treat it with the respect and Holiness that it deserves. We should not waste this opportunity to pray before him with sincerity and feeling. The same is also true of the Chazzan’s

prepetition. One should sit in reverence as the Chazzan talks to G-d one –on –one on behalf of the congregation.

We are also more likely to give presents to people if they keep driving us mad. This is how we should approach prayer on the High Holy Days. We need to continually ask and beg G-d for what we need and want, as if we are trying to break down the barriers to heaven. In the same way that people buy lots of lottery tickets to increase their chances of hitting the jackpot, so too one's bombardment of prayers increases one's chances of receiving answers.

Having said all of this, we must not lose sight of the fact that the single most important thing to pray about is the lack of G-d's sovereignty in the world. This is the basis of the whole *Yomim Nararim davening*. If we show G-d that we care about his needs, then he is more likely to remember our needs at the same time.

It was pointed out to me by my friend , Danny Friedman, that King David in the book of Psalms regularly uses the word 'mizmor lit a song' when praying for his life. He screams (psalm 142 v. 7) 'Hearken to my song for I am troubled greatly, save me as my enemies are stronger than me'. This should be a lesson to us in how even in times of troubles we must sing to Hashem. We say in the Pizmon (song with refrain) for the first day Selichos 'To hear the song and prayer'. This theme of singing to Hashem is very prevalent in Jewish thought. We should all take this message on board and join in the communal singing. Even if one doesn't know the words, just hum the tune (like the idea of the shofar).

So I would like to conclude by Blessing you all in that Hashem should listen to all our prayers and grant us good health, wealth and success, to be enjoyed in our utopic society in a peaceful Israel following the final redemption.

