

Praying

It is very early in the morning, and I am walking through the Pennsylvania woods in the pre-dawn half-light, carrying our baby who woke up early in our tent. We go sleepily down the forest path, both of us gazing up in awe at the beauty of the trees' branches swaying in the slight breeze, reaching out to touch the leaves of a bush, smelling the pine needles crunching at our feet, hearing the soft sounds of insects, and watching as the sun slowly reveals itself by the lightening of the sky. All the while the words of the earliest morning prayers, *Birchot ha-Shahar*, "the blessings of the dawn," are on my lips. The birds greet the morning; in heaven's light we see light; we were blind but our eyes have now been opened to the wonder of this world that seems newly made, the acts of creation renewed, everything waiting in stillness for us to take it in. We walk slowly on, into the light.

It is many years later, the baby now a teenager and joined by brothers. It is Saturday night, the time to bid farewell to Shabbat. We gather around the table, lit only by the light of the triple-wicked candle of Havdalah. As we are about to say the blessing over the flames, I look around the table at my family, at their faces bathed in the soft glow. I am filled with a sense of gratitude so large that I can barely contain it. How did I get so lucky to have such a partner in life, and to have together brought into the world such amazing human beings, to love and be loved by them? Thankfulness spills over into the words of the prayer, for the lights of fire, for the sweetness of our family, for this moment of connection and joy. Even after we extinguish the Havdalah candle in the cup of wine, the glow of that image stays with me.

It is still more years later, and it is the middle of the night. I am lying on the floor by my father's bed as he fitfully sleeps, laboring to breathe, having flown across the country to rush to his side. I know that he might die this night, and my feelings and hopes are a gigantic mess. I don't want him to suffer, so I hope for a quick and calm end. I don't want to lose him, so I hope for him to pull through, to last at least the night, so we could have just a little more time together. I don't want to face the enormity of loss, so I hope for comfort, though I can't see from where it could come. I have no idea how to sort this all out. All I have is a pit in my stomach and a yearning for something I can't articulate. I focus that yearning on my father's laborious breathing, willing him to take a breath in and a breath out, a *n'shimah* for his *neshamah*, a breath that shows his soul is still in this world. Listening to his breath, I latch onto one thing I can ask for. *Oseh shalom bimromav* – may the One who makes peace above bring peace to my father, peace to my heart, peace to this room so isolated in the darkness. Yearning for peace, I stay awake through the night.

As a Jewish community, we often think of praying as the act of reciting ancient words from a book, sometimes in unison and sometimes in silence, mostly in Hebrew, only occasionally in English. The book can be intimidating to open, the language unfamiliar, the concepts in the translation difficult to interpret. So although we may attend services, for many of us praying becomes a thing that other people do. Tonight I want to invite you to think of praying differently, as answering basic human needs, things as important to human life as sustenance, shelter, and rest: the need to give voice to wonder, the need to speak our gratitude, the need to express our yearnings and hopes. Tonight we are going to talk about the

kind of praying we might need, to explore what we can learn from our ancient ancestors about how to do it, and – fair warning! – to try it ourselves. I promise, the words won't be the hard part, because we'll only use a few; the hard part will be opening ourselves up to the possibility that this could be something important for us. So let's relax our defenses for just a little bit and consider some of what praying could do for us, if we let it.

To take us in and give us some focus, let's consider the Hebrew verb "to pray," *l'hitpalel*. Those familiar with Hebrew grammar will notice right away that this is a reflexive verb; *t'filah*, prayer, in Hebrew is something we do with or to ourselves, an interior process of reflection and contemplation. Paradoxically, this internal process has the power to take us out of ourselves, to allow us to forge connections with the world, with other people, and with things transcendent, which we name as soul, as spirit, or sometimes as God. Unlike the verb "to pray" in English, though, which is so often linked to "praying for" or "praying to," *l'hitpalel* doesn't easily take a preposition or object. We needn't necessarily have a firm idea of for what we are praying before we embark on the journey of *t'filah*. Nor do we need to have figured out once and for all to whom or to what, if anything, we might be praying or what we finally believe. Praying is something we can do in and for itself, not after having reached a perfect understanding of the nature and meaning of this world but as a way of helping us notice and figure out the meaning of the moments and experiences in our lives that are most important. Let's see how we might do it.

I: Wonder (*T'hilah*)

Isaac went out to meditate in the field
before evening came.¹

The ancient rabbis really believed in praying regularly, but they had a problem. The Torah is full of sacrifices and altars, sheep and goats, yearling bulls and rams, but at least on the surface there is precious little praying in it, and certainly no explicit mandate to pray three times a day. What did they do? They found in the life of each of the three patriarchs a moment of stopping, of reflection, of meditation. What's more, they found that each of these moments happened at a different time of day. Based on this, they argued that the three prayer services we know of were actually originated by those three patriarchs, by Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.² The afternoon service became known as *Minhah* after the grain offering used at that time in the Temple; the evening service became known as *Ma'ariv* after the prayer that declares that God "makes the evening fall" – *ma'ariv 'aravim*; and the morning service became known as *Shaharit* because it was said at dawn, *shahar*.

In this interpretation, Isaac originated the afternoon *Minhah* service, since he is said in this verse to be "meditating" "before evening came." There are three interesting things about this story. The first has to do with what Isaac is doing. The verb used here, *lasu-ah*, is a little obscure. Most commentators relate it to the word *sihah*, meaning conversation, but it is a strange conversation that Isaac is having with no other person present. This leads to the

¹ Genesis 24:63.

² B'reishit Rabbah 68:9.

assumption that Isaac is either talking to God or talking to himself or maybe both, which gives us the translation “meditating,” which many commentators then further translate as *t’filah*, prayer. Whatever Isaac is doing, it is an interior process, a consideration of something in his mind, heart, or soul that he may or may not be sharing with the divine.

The second interesting thing about this story is its context. Why is Isaac walking in the field? His father has sent his trusted servant to find him a wife, with heavenly aid the servant has done so, and Isaac is waiting for this miraculously chosen life partner to arrive. While he waits, he goes out to the field, and I can only imagine him meditating on the glories of nature, looking at the world with wonder, as he contemplates the wondrous next chapter of his life that is about to unfold. This is a mode of praying: looking at the world and our lives with, in Lawrence Kushner’s resonant phrase, “eyes remade for wonder.”³ It is no accident that for Isaac this mode of praying takes place in the context of nature and in the context of a loving relationship with another human being. For many of us, these are the times when we can be filled with wonder, and when we sometimes feel the urge to express it, somehow, whether inside of our own hearts, to our half-formed intimations of the divine, or to the universe in general. When Isaac is experiencing both of these, it is no surprise that a prayer of wonder fills his soul.

Isaac, of course, is not the only person in the Torah to feel and express wonder, and I’m thinking here of the surprising story of Leah. Leah, the older sister of Rachel, who through her father’s machinations becomes Jacob’s less-loved wife, would have good reason to be bitter with her lot. She is stuck in a marriage she never desired, with a man who never intended to marry her. Her younger sister seems to have it all and demonstrates that in front of her at every turn. Yet Leah remains capable not only of happiness but of wonder, this time brought about by another of the common sources of wonder in our lives today: the birth of a child. Leah rejoices at the birth of each of her sons, but as their names attest, she becomes filled with greater and greater wonder as she bears Jacob six. Her first three sons she names in ways that express her competition with her sister: Reuben – “God has seen my affliction;” Shimon – “God has heard that I was unloved;” and Levi – “Now my husband will become attached to me.”⁴ But the following sons Leah names simply in wonder at their existence: Judah – “I will praise!;” Issachar – “A reward!;” Zevulun – “A choice gift!”⁵ She has moved beyond competing with her sister and sees her own life as a gift filled with wonders, just as we rejoice in the wonder of a new child that puts our world into perspective.

Tapping in to our own sense of wonder can be easy in nature, or when we are in love, or when a child is born. It can be more challenging to find and express wonder in our everyday lives. We need to make an effort to look at the world and the people in it with wonder, and we need words to express it. So I want to try an experiment with wonder right now. I’m going to ask you to take a moment to think of something in your lives, maybe even something in this room, that you could consider freshly, with wonder, marveling at how it could be part of your experience of this world. It can be a person, something from nature, or even a human-made

³ See the very worthwhile [Eyes Remade for Wonder: A Lawrence Kushner Reader](#) (Jewish Lights, 1998).

⁴ Genesis 29:32-34.

⁵ Genesis 29:35, 30:18-20.

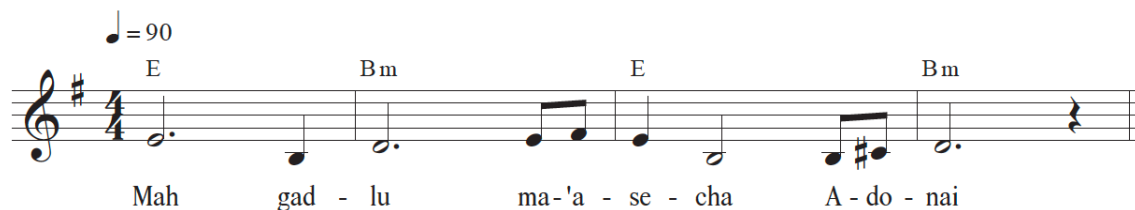
object; anything will do. And then, keeping it in your mind, we're going to try to put that feeling into four words of prayer, just four, from Psalm 92: *Mah gadlu ma'asecha Adonai*.⁶ It means, "How amazing are your creations, God!" But you don't have to worry about the God part if that's going to distract you. Just express it to yourself. "How amazing is this world!" So we've got it, right? We're going to keep something in our minds that we see with wonder, and we're going to pour the wonder into those four words, using a tune by Yoel Sykes from Nava Tehila in Jerusalem. We need to keep our attention on all three things: the experience and the words and the song. I didn't say praying was easy! Let's give it a try:

מה גדלו מעשיך ה'
MAH GADLU MA'ASECHA ADONAI

Mah Gadlu

Psalm 92:6

Yoel Sykes



⁶ Psalm 92:6

II: Gratitude (*Hodayah*)

[Jacob] encountered the place
and stopped there for the night,
for the sun had set.⁷

Jacob is in the middle of nowhere. He has just fled from his home and his family after cheating his twin brother, Esau, out of both birthright and blessing. Jacob narrowly escaped with his life, after Esau swore to kill him, and now he is alone, without family or friend, in an unfamiliar land. What happens next? *Va-yifga' ba-makom* – Jacob encounters, literally “runs into,” “the place.” What place are we talking about? Isn’t this just a random, empty spot in the wilderness? In Torah, nothing is random, and the ancient rabbis see in this verse Jacob’s encounter with the divine, with *Ha-Makom*, “the Place,” the Source of all, the ground of the world.⁸ The ancients do not see the timing of Jacob’s prayer experience as random, either. They write:

Jacob sought to pass by, but the whole world made itself into an impenetrable wall in front of him... “The sun had set” really means “the sun had been made to set,” teaching us that the Holy Blessed One caused the orb of the sun to set in order to speak with our ancestor Jacob in private. This can be compared to one who is beloved of a king and visits him from time to time. The king says, “Extinguish the candles, extinguish the lanterns, for I would like to speak with my beloved in private.”⁹

The darkening sky of evening itself is a sign that it is time to turn inward, to seek connection between what is deep within us and what is outside us.

This encounter surprises Jacob. He assumed that having left all he knew, he was alone and friendless. But the encounter shows him that something else is going on. He is not alone but accompanied; he is not in the middle of nowhere but in a place, the place, a place where he can be guided, protected, and loved. His dreams are full of guardian angels going up and down a stairway to heaven, and a divine promise that he will never be alone.¹⁰ Although Jacob has never previously been one for introspection or deep thought, this encounter changes him. He realizes that there is a force in the universe besides himself that has given him what he has, and he is filled with an unfamiliar feeling: gratitude. He awakes and says, “Surely God is present in this place, but I did not know it.” He makes an offering to God and promises God his allegiance as thanks for all of the blessings that he has received and will receive. He changes, at least for a moment, from a posture of arrogance to an attitude of humility and thanksgiving.

Again, Jacob is not alone in the Hebrew Bible in making this shift into gratitude. As we heard in the haftarah on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, Hannah, the rabbinic exemplar of

⁷ Genesis 28:11.

⁸ See Bereishit Rabbah 68:9.

⁹ Bereishit Rabbah 68:10.

¹⁰ Genesis 28:15.

prayer, starts out her story embittered and hopeless, cruelly taunted for her childlessness, and without any understanding from her husband.¹¹ She prays – and here the Bible uses the explicit word for praying, *titpalel* – with tears, with words, and with silence; she pours out her heart, and something miraculous happens, long before the eventual birth of her child: she feels better, her heart is eased, “she is no longer downcast.”¹² Something has changed within her, and she is able to feel gratitude for her life and all that is in it, whether she gives birth or not. She is so changed that when her longed-for child is born, she gives him into the service of the sanctuary and then sings a prayer of thanksgiving to the divine:

My heart exults in Adonai;
My spirit has been lifted up through Adonai...
I rejoice in your deliverance.¹³

How do we make the shift from seeing all of the deficiencies and losses in our lives to a posture of gratitude? How do we get to the place where we, like Hannah, can leave behind our bitterness and sing a prayer of thanksgiving? Again, it is a shift of perspective, a retraining of the eyes to see all that we have received, from the universe, from others, from God – the exact framing of where these blessings come from is not the crucial part. What is crucial is being able to get out of our own way enough to see, at the very least, that it is not true, as Moses teaches us, that “my hand has done all this.” We are not the source or the ultimate cause of most of the good things we experience. Once we make that shift, we see that we need to offer up our thanks, and once again, Jewish traditions give us a way to do that.

Again, we’re going to try this ourselves, this time using three of the traditional words of the prayer for thanksgiving that is in every version of the Amidah, words which traditionally are said three times every day, as if to get them through our heads: *Modim anachnu lach* – “We give thanks to you,” or, if you prefer, simply, “We give thanks.” This time we’ll use a tune by Cantor Ari Schwartz. First I want you to find in your heart something for which you are truly grateful. It can be small or large, a person, an experience, anything, as long as you can really feel your thankfulness for them or for it. Hold the image in your mind; it might help sometimes to close your eyes so you don’t get distracted by what you see around you. Now we’re going to all hold that image, and the words, and the tune inside us and try to pour our gratitude into what is coming out of our mouths. Let’s give it a try:

מודים אנחנו לך
MODIM ANACHNU LACH

¹¹ I Samuel 1:1-8.

¹² I Samuel 1:18.

¹³ I Samuel 2:1.

Modim Anachnu Lach

From Youth Mahzor 2018

Cantor Azi Schwartz

$\text{♩} = 120$

The musical score is written on two staves in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 9/8 time signature. The tempo is marked as quarter note = 120. The first staff contains measures 1 through 4, and the second staff contains measures 5 through 8. Chord symbols (Em, D, G, Am, Bm) are placed above the notes. The lyrics are written below the notes, with hyphens indicating syllables that span multiple notes.

Em D G Am

Mo - dim__ Mo - dim__ a - nach - nu lach

5 Em D Em Bm Em

Mo - dim__ Mo - dim__ a - nach - nu__ lach

III: Yearning (*Bakashah*)

Abraham rose up early in the morning
toward the place,
and he stood there before Adonai.¹⁴

Abraham is in a tough spot. He took all of his courage in his hands and spoke out a challenge when God proposed destroying Sodom and Gomorrah. “Should not the Judge of all the earth act justly??” he cried.¹⁵ He bargained with God, getting God to agree that if there were just 50 righteous people in the cities, they would not be destroyed, then 45, then 30, 20, and finally 10. And God committed: “I will not destroy [the cities] for the sake of the ten.”¹⁶ All the while, though, God must have known that there were far fewer than ten righteous people and that the cities were doomed. But Abraham did not. Imagine his shock and horror when, just the next day, “fire and brimstone” rain on Sodom and Gomorrah from the heavens, “annihilating those cities and the entire plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities and the vegetation of the ground.”¹⁷

This is the moment, this terrible moment when Abraham sees the destruction that he sought in vain to prevent, that according to the ancient rabbis Abraham begins to pray. What mode of praying is this? Abraham “rises up” and approaches “the place;” like Jacob, Abraham is understood here to be encountering the divine, *Ha-Makom*, the place, the Source, the ground of all existence. But while Jacob lies down and finds a place of gratitude within himself, Abraham stands up. He is upset and confused; his own will is anything but clear. He longs for connection, for comfort, for peace, but he is also wary of the very encounter that he seeks. He hopes for understanding and clarity at the same time that he doubts that it is possible. And yet he stands there “before Adonai,” and from this place of inarticulate yearning, he prays. Maybe we can imagine his prayer: “Give it meaning.” “Make it make sense.” “Give me a sign that a future is possible.” These are prayers that may have come from our own hearts at one time or another. And although there is no explicit answer from God, Abraham is able to continue his journey; just having expressed his yearnings, however confused and complicated, seems to have been, at least for the moment, enough.

Along with Hannah, whose silent prayers are the rabbinic exemplar of reaching out to the divine, another figure of inarticulate yearning in the Torah is Rebecca. She has left her family and place and followed a stranger to the land of Canaan on the strength of her belief that a force greater than her has brought her into connection with Abraham’s son Isaac and his family. Yet, although she and Isaac alone among all couples in the Torah are said to fall in love, her longings are not satisfied. She remains childless, and the future she imagined remains a mirage. What does she do? According to the ancient rabbis, she enters into prayer along with Isaac, crying out to God for a child.¹⁸ Rashi notes that the word used here for prayer, *va-*

¹⁴ Genesis 19:27.

¹⁵ Genesis 18:25.

¹⁶ Genesis 18:32.

¹⁷ Genesis 19:24-25.

¹⁸ Bereshit Rabbah 63:5.

ye'atar, indicates that the prayer was urgent and intense, but we are not given any of the words. Again, it is the inarticulate yearning of the heart, maybe even accompanied by tears, that characterizes this kind of encounter within Rebecca's heart and perhaps with the divine.

Many of us may be familiar with this kind of yearning. Sometimes it comes upon us when we are facing extreme situations like severe illness, serious danger, or death. Other times the causes are more subtle: prolonged uncertainty, emotional confusion, shock or horror at the workings of the world. As human beings, we need something to do with this feeling, a way to think about it, words to express it, if we are going to be able to deal with it and move on in our lives. There are many prayers in Jewish tradition that could work here, but I want us to try one that might be widely applicable, familiar to us from the Hallel service, four words from Psalm 118: *Ana Adonai Hoshi'ah Na* – "Please, God, bring salvation!" Or if you prefer, "Please save me!" or "Please make it make sense!" or even "Please make it stop!" Again, it is expressing the yearning of our hearts that is important, not so much to whom we addressing it.

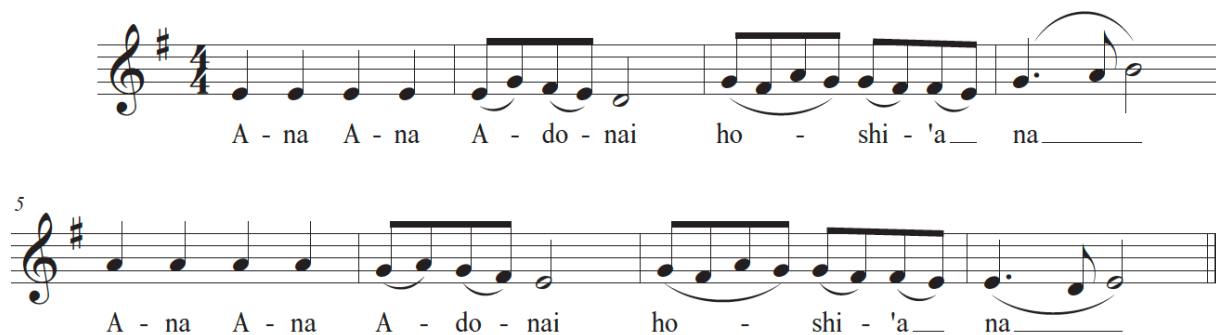
As before, I'm going to ask you now to think of something you're yearning for, something you're confused about, something that upsets you and makes you want to cry out. I know, there are so many, too many things to choose from, but just for this moment, choose one. Hold it in your heart. Close your eyes if you want to. We'll use a traditional tune from Hallel this time, but don't get distracted – the point is to pour our yearning into the words and the tune, not to let the tune draw all of our attention. We don't need to sing pretty right now. This is a gut level expression of our hopes. Let's try it:

אנא ה' הושיעה נא
 ANA ADONAI HOSHI'AH NA

Ana Adonai Hoshia Na

From Hallel

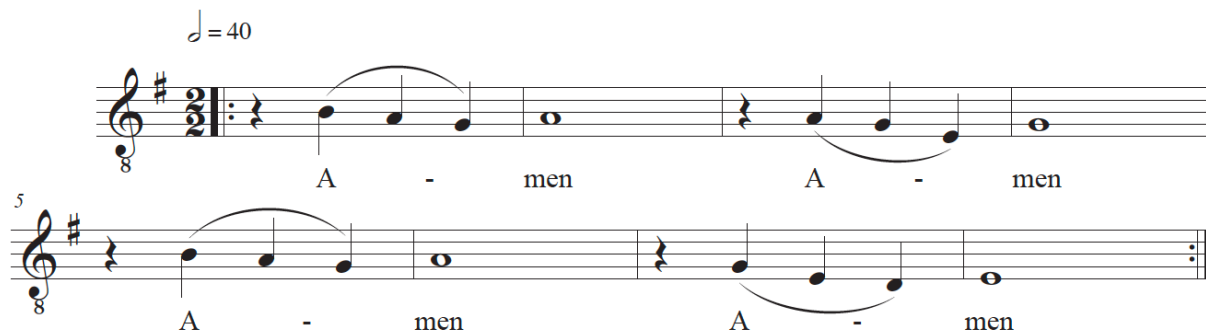
Traditional



So now we have explored three modes of praying: wonder, gratitude, and yearning. There are more, but these are a good start. And if you noticed, we didn't have to open up a book, or learn Hebrew, or even use very many words. We didn't have to figure out what we really mean by God or to whom our prayers are addressed. We didn't even need to figure out exactly what we're hoping for. Those questions are important, but they are parallel to the experience of praying, not prerequisites before we can start. So if praying hasn't been something you've done often or ever, if it's been something other people do, let tonight be a start. And if you're really stuck, and you can't even figure out which mode of praying you need at any particular moment, there's a wonderful thing the rabbis invented called "Amen." It's a way of tagging along with someone else's prayer, when you're not ready, right now, to say your own. It's a way of saying, "Present!" to the experience of praying, and it's really kind of amazing, because it's just one word. Let's end with that, using the tune we started the service with:

אמן
AMEN

Amen



G'mar hatimah tovah.