

Why Pray?
Kol Nidre 5781
Rabbi D'ror Chankin-Gould

Virtual Prayer Services, in my house, are a total zoo. I've got the service streaming on the iPad, Avi is pulling my Tallis off, Matan is banging his action figures on the train table, diapers need to be changed, Cheerios are flying, and life is chaos. And then, even when the kids settle in, the setting is just *all* wrong. I'm distracted by the living room clutter, the dishes in the sink are screaming at me to wash them, and the neighbor's dog won't stop yapping. I wonder why it's hard to feel spiritual?

Isn't this virtual prayer thing hard?

We're doing our absolute best to bring you an experience that's as close as possible to what it would have been like to sit in the room together, and I'm so proud of the beautiful music and the incredible technology, but it's also true that it's just *not* the same.

I know when I'm streaming the Anshe Emet services from home, it's hard to pray. I love hearing the Cantor's voice. I'm inspired by the Rabbi's sermon, but I struggle getting my heart into it.

And for you, tonight, seated on your couch or in your easy chair, looking at a screen instead of at a human face, I imagine it's not easy to pray. The physical setting of the synagogue: the bimah, the ark, the windows, the seats, the decorum... it all is designed to put us in the mood. It *can* be done at home, I *know* it can, but the setting is rough, no question.

And the truth is that the spiritual setting of our times is also a challenge to our prayer lives. As much as dirty dishes and noisy children are a distracting physical setting for prayer, all the more so is the emotional darkness of our times a challenging spiritual setting. With a no end in sight pandemic upon us, it can be hard to remember *why* exactly we're praying. In the midst of the coronavirus, if the purpose of prayer is to petition God to make our lives better, and yet the situation persists, then why are we praying in the first place? In a time of a global pandemic of epic proportions, what exactly are we praying *for*?

One possibility is that we are praying for the Coronavirus to go away. If the purpose of prayer is to ask for God's intervention in our lives, then perhaps our prayer tonight would be: "God, we have suffered so much, we've lost so many, please cure this disease, heal those who suffer, and restore our world to what it once was."

A prayer that asks for God's material intervention is called a "bakashah"- a request. There are plenty of examples in the Jewish tradition. We pray for those who are ill to be healed with the *mi shebeirach*. We pray for financial sustenance and job security in the daily Amidah. And on Yom Kippur, we pray for life itself:

זָכַרְנוּ לַהֲשִׁיב מִלְּךָ הַפֶּזַע בְּתַיִם וְכִתְּבֵנוּ בְּסֵפֶר הַחַיִּים

“Remember us for life, Sovereign who delights in life, and inscribe us in the Book of Life.” Many Jews, for many generations have prayed *bakashot*- have beseeched God to do miracles for us, to change our fate...to save us. Those prayers are dear to our hearts.

And yet, the challenge with a prayer for intervention is that sometimes those prayers *aren't* answered. My son, for example, always prays before catching butterflies... which is nearly every day. He sees a butterfly and pauses, net in hand, and says aloud, “God, please let me catch that butterfly. Amen.” I *love* those prayers. I also remind him that sometimes we pray for something and God doesn't grant our wish.. Many of us have had that same experience: we have prayed for a job we didn't get, a game our team didn't win, or a miracle of healing our loved one never received. Prayers are not guarantees. Perhaps God had other plans? Perhaps it just wasn't meant to be? Perhaps what *we* needed out of that prayer was to give voice to our yearnings, even if our dreams weren't ultimately fulfilled?

For some, this mode of prayer is moving and connective. However, for others, those disappointments leave a feeling of emptiness. If prayer is successful only to the extent that we receive what we asked for, we've set an *awfully* high bar. We might leave the experience of prayer feeling failed or wondering what the point was. If we pray for the Coronavirus to end, and yet it persists, then why *are* we praying?

Some folks connect to prayer alone on a mountaintop, others in a crowded sanctuary. Just as there is more than one physical setting for prayer, there is more than one spiritual setting. Hebrew School taught us to petition God, but our Tradition offers more than one approach of what a person might seek in prayer: material intervention, strength and courage, closeness with God, or introspection. Could a change in spiritual mindset serve us differently or better during these challenging times?

Instead of seeking intervention, some of us might pray to ask God for *intangible* support: for wisdom, resilience, or creativity- less for someone to be healed, and more for the patient to be courageous and the doctors to be wise. Think about those breath-taking qualities of the human spirit: dignity that persists despite oppression, hope that bubbles up even in the midst of darkness, or compassion that overflows notwithstanding a callous world. Where do they come from? Perhaps we turn to God for the capacity to be the best versions of ourselves. When we pray for our country, it is in *this* vein. We don't ask God to win our wars for us, but rather to make us brave and true. We pray “uproot from our hearts hatred and malice, jealousy and strife.” And on a personal level, we ask God to bring out our best qualities in Elohai Netzor, the prayer that comes at the tail end of the Amidah:

אֱלֹהֵי נְצוֹר לְשׁוֹנֵי מַרְעַ וּשְׁפָתֵי מִדְבַר מְרָמָה. וְלִמְקַלְלֵי נַפְשֵׁי תְדוּם

My God, keep my tongue from evil, my lips from lies, help me ignore those who would slander me.” We pray to God to grant us the strength to bite our tongues, and, even in the face of adversity, to take the high road. Perhaps, that is the object of prayer- to be fortified with courage and goodness we didn't even know we had inside of us.

A different “spiritual setting” for prayer is not to ask *for* anything, neither for tangible blessings nor intangible strength. Perhaps instead the purpose of prayer is to *feel* God's presence, and for God to *feel* ours. Abraham Joshua Heschel explained, “Prayer cannot bring water to parched fields, or mend a broken bridge, or rebuild a ruined city; but prayer can water an arid soul, mend

a broken heart, and rebuild a weakened will.” Prayer is our experience of allowing God’s presence to wash over us, not in order to *fix* anything, but just so that we might be less alone. Think of the time with your spouse, your kid, your parent, or your friend when you tried to solve their problem. We’ve all been there. They told you of their pain, and you tried to fix it or to give advice. And it turns out, they just wanted to be heard. So too, with God. We might pray so that God will hear us, and we might pray to hear God. The culmination of Selichot, of tonight’s prayers of contrition is the famous “Sh’ma Koleinu”: “Hear our voice, Adonai our God, be kind and have compassion for us.” The prayer is saying: “God please hear us, please love us.” In this spiritual setting, a successful experience of prayer is when we feel seen and heard, when we *know* that we are not alone.

A completely different approach to prayer is as a form of guided introspection. Perhaps, prayer allows us to reflect on who *we are* and to contrast that with who we *could* be. Rabbi Elliot Dorff reminds us that the Hebrew word for prayer, Hitpalel is reflexive: it turns inward. The root “palel” may come from an ancient word meaning “judge.” So to pray, *l’hitpalel* is to judge oneself. Prayer is our opportunity to hold a mirror in front of our faces, and honestly assess how *we* have been acting. To that end, the audience for prayer might be *you*. So when the prayer book reminds us that God is merciful, it is holding up a mirror: have we been merciful? When the prayer book reminds us that God demands justice, it is holding up a mirror: have we forwarded the cause of justice? And indeed, on Yom Kippur, when the prayer book forces us to confront litany after litany of transgressions, it is holding up a mirror: have we been disrespectful? Have we used our words to injure? Have we hurt those we love? *Lehitpalel*, to judge oneself, means that prayer invites us to hold ourselves accountable. In this mindset, the purpose of prayer is to inspire reflection which will lead to action.

A physical setting for prayer sets our hearts up for success: space to breathe, a comfortable chair, a tallis draped around us, and imagery that inspires us and calms us. Even at home, we can bring in as many of those elements as possible. And even when it’s not perfect, we can close our eyes, breathe deeply, and make the most of the setting we’re in.

A spiritual setting for prayer is even more important. For some, in the turbulent times we’re in, you may find that you need to change the spiritual drapery. The good news is, our rich and varied tradition isn’t one size fits all. If your prayer-mentality isn’t serving you, try another one on for size. Paint the walls of your spiritual home a different shade and see how it suits you.

After all, some Jews pray for intervention, some Jews pray for inspiration, some Jews pray to feel God’s companionship, and some Jews pray to be reflective. No stance is better than the rest, but it’s helpful to remember that there’s more than one pigment in our palate.

Tonight, *why* are you praying? To what end?

We asked earlier, in the midst of a global pandemic what exactly are we praying *for*?

Perhaps, in prayer, we ask God to, at long last, cure this disease. Perhaps, in prayer we entreat God to give wisdom to the doctors, guidance to the health officials, stamina to the scientists, and resilience to us all. Perhaps, in prayer, we seek God’s company so that as we navigate these

turbulent waters, we might feel less alone. And, Perhaps, in prayer we reflect on our own role in addressing the terror of this disease, so that we might take action to move our society forward.

And in your personal life, on this Kol Nidre, this eve of the Day of Atonement, what are *you* praying for?

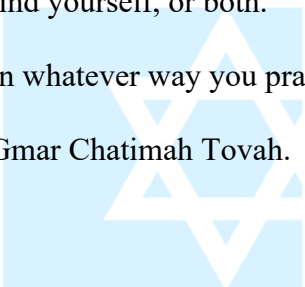
Are you praying for God to heal those you love, to make the new year sweeter, and to inscribe you and your loved ones in the Book of Life? Are you praying for the wisdom and courage to meet life's obstacles with fortitude and integrity? Are you praying to seek intimacy with the Divine, to feel God's arms around you, so that you will remember that you are never *truly* alone? Are you praying to hold a mirror up to your face, to remind you of who you've been and to inspire you to be better?

This Kol Nidre, it is time to pray. May we each create the physical setting that is most conducive to our spirits. May we each choose the spiritual setting that best connects to that ache in our hearts, that longing to connect, and that core within that is hungry for prayer.

May you find what you seek. May you acknowledge your yearnings with honesty. May you articulate your dreams passionately. May you *be* heard. May you *feel* heard. May you find God or find yourself, or both.

In whatever way you pray, for whatever reason you pray, may your prayers be answered.

Gmar Chatimah Tovah.



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