

Can Prayer Be Meaningful?: Feeling the Presence of God

BY RABBI DR. JACOB J. SCHACTER

Tefilla presents, for me, the most formidable challenge I face as someone trying to be a responsible and committed Jew. The sheer repetitive nature of the required text - three times a day, at least, every day, without any break - often makes it hard for me to muster even a small measure of authentic feelings. I am familiar with the three-fold division of the weekday *Amida*— giving praise, stating requests, and articulating thanks – but I find it hard to express these sentiments, even on occasion, with any degree of sincerity. How is it possible to recite the same exact words thousands of times and identify emotionally with what is being recited?

The problem arises because *tefilla* is described by Hazal (*Ta'anit* 2a) as *avodah she-ba-lev*. To properly fulfill this *mitzvah*, it is insufficient to just recite words. While, in the formulation of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, that articulation constitutes the *act* of the *mitzvah*, what he calls the *ma'aseh ha-mitzvah* or *pe'ulat ha-mitzvah*, a proper fulfillment of the *mitzvah* requires as well an inner, experiential dimension that involves the emotions or the heart, what he calls the *kiyyum ha-mitzvah*. Prayer, for him, “consists of both experiencing the complete helplessness of man, his absolute dependence upon God, and the performance of the ritual of prayer, of reciting fixed texts.”¹ If this is the case, if feeling or experiencing is an indispensable component of the fulfillment of *tefilla*, the bar is set very high indeed. How many times can one recite *Ashrei* and find *Ashrei* meaningful?

No wonder the Orthodox community is struggling with finding meaning in *tefilla*, for both young and old alike.² Different siddurim, with different size letters, fonts, colors, pictures, and translations, are being produced at a rapid pace, all with the goal of, somehow, making *tefilla* more personal and, thereby, more meaningful.

It is hard for me to suggest which methods of enhancing the *tefilla* experience are most promising at this time. *Tefilla*, for me, is a most personal experience, and all individuals need to determine what they, personally, would find necessary for *tefilla*

to be meaningful for them. I can only address what I find most useful for me, and that is to focus on recognizing, as I am getting ready to pray, that I am about to initiate a private, intimate encounter with God. It would be nice, of course, to feel this way for the entire davening, but I am happy if I can achieve this state even just for the *Amida* or even just for part of the *Amida*. I work to try to imagine myself as if I am standing *lifnei Hashem*, in the presence of God, engaged in a personal conversation with Him.³

The notion of *tefilla* as a *lifnei Hashem* experience is well known. Rabbi Soloveitchik repeatedly noted that prayer is an encounter with God. He even went so far as to assert that when one prays, one finds oneself in the presence of God, not just aware that one is addressing God (this is, indeed, the substance of much of the words we recite), but aware that one is, actually, in God's presence. “Prayer is basically an awareness of man finding himself in the presence of and addressing himself to his Maker, and to pray has one connotation only: to stand before God.”⁴ There is precedent for this imagery in the Rambam's *Hilkhot Tefilla* where he underscored this as fundamental to the *tefilla* experience: “What is meant by intention (*kavannah*)? One should clear his mind from all thoughts and envision himself as if he is standing before the Divine Presence (*ke-ihu hu omed lifnei ha-Shekhinah*)” (4:16); he should stand like a servant before his master (*ve-omed ke-eved lifnei rabo*) (5:4).

The real question is, of course, how to cultivate such a sensibility. What can one do to feel “as if he is standing before the Divine Presence,” “like a servant before his master?” I have long struggled with this but found it easier to do when I began personally to resonate with two statements of Rabbi Soloveitchik in which he described having felt this way in his own personal life. I was aware of them from the time they were both first published in 1978, but only in the last few years have I felt their force and power. One describes the influence his mother had on him: “I learned from her the most important thing in life

– to feel the presence of the Almighty and the gentle pressure of His hand resting upon my frail shoulders.”⁵ He portrays here how his mother taught him to experience God in a direct, personal, and unmediated way. The second specifically describes an experience he had while engaged in prayer:

Eleven years ago my wife lay on her deathbed and I watched her dying, day by day, hour by hour; medically, I could do very little for her, all I could do was to pray. However, I could not pray in the hospital; somehow I could not find God in the whitewashed, long corridors among the interns and the nurses. However, the need for prayer was great; I could not live without gratifying this need. The moment I returned home I would rush to my room, fall on my knees and pray fervently. God, in those moments, appeared not as the exalted, majestic King, but rather as a humble, close friend, brother, father: in such moments of black despair, He was not far from me; He was right there in the dark room; I felt his warm hand, *ke-va-kakhol*, on my shoulder, I hugged his knees, *ke-va-kakhol*. He was with me in the narrow confines of a small room, taking up no space at all.⁶

Regretfully, I do not know how to teach others to achieve this level of awareness of the immediacy of God's presence. But I feel very blessed that I achieve it once in a while and it is this that sustains me, when I engage in prayer and when I don't. Prayer is meaningful to me when I feel the closeness of the God to whom I am directing my prayers.

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1 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Marriage," in *Family Redeemed: Essays on Family Relationships* (2000), 40. See also Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Al ha-Teshuvah (Jerusalem, 1975), 41-44; Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance* (Northvale and London, 1996, 1984), 71-74; Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer* (Jersey City, 2003), in passing.

2 See "Exploring the Power of Prayer," the cover story of the current issue of

the *Orthodox Union's Jewish Action* 78:1 (Fall 5778/2017): 18-37.

3 I do recognize that R. Chaim Soloveitchik famously states that Rambam requires that the awareness of standing lifnei Hashem extend for the duration of the entire Amidah. See *Hiddushei Rabbenu Hayyim ha-Levi, Hil. Tefillah* 4:1.

4 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *The Lonely*

Man of Faith (Lanham, 2004), 56.

5 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "A Tribute to the Rebbetzin of Talne," *Tradition* 17 (1978): 77.

6 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Majesty and Humility," *Tradition* 17 (1978): 33. The first quote comes from a talk he delivered on January 30, 1977, the second from a talk he delivered on April 14, 1973.

Personalized Prayer

BY RABBI EZRA SCHWARTZ

Few can question that *tefilla* in our communities is seriously lacking. Our shuls leave us with davening that is too often, even at its best, rushed and uninspiring. At its worst, the experience can be downright painful to hear off-key mispronunciations of Hebrew and to witness the rampant talking and disrespect for what should be *avoda she-beleiv*. Ask high school educators and you are likely to hear that they dread *tefilla* and the enforcement of what so many students find meaningless. As high-schoolers mature and develop, both intellectually and spiritually, and even when they return from Israel with a more intense approach to Torah and mitzvot, too often this does not translate into a more meaningful *tefilla*. Therefore, it is no wonder that Yeshiva University is constantly experimenting with minyan times and locations; the most popular minyanim on campus are the most rushed.

There have been many significant attempts at improving *tefilla* in our communities. Sadly, they have largely failed. While new siddurim are published with the aim of adding insight and profundity to our davening, most often these are not read, and if read, they don't improve the *tefilla* experience. As Rabbi Shalom Carmy notes regarding *tefilla*, quoting the legendary *gaon* Yogi Berra, "You can't think and hit at the same time." In other words, one cannot learn about *tefilla* and daven at the same time. New siddurim are often left to adorn our bookshelves with their beautiful covers but do not do much to transform our prayer. Music has been added to many *tefillot*, particularly Kabbalat Shabbat, in an effort to engage more *mispallemim* in sincere

prayer. Leaving aside the problematic name for these *tefilla* services, in practice they enhance only prayers of secondary importance. Kabbalat Shabbat may be very beautiful, but subsequently, during *ma'ariv*, the *shemone esreh*, which is meant to be the spiritual apex of prayer, remains uninspired and rushed. In contrast to the communal involvement experienced during Kabbalat Shabbat, *ma'ariv* lags behind, and *tefilla*, in its pure form, remains lax.

So what, if anything, can be done? I would argue that we need to shift the way we teach and educate about *tefilla*. Too often, the focus is on the importance of the words themselves. However, students are never trained to go beyond the text and are never introduced to the opportunity to personalize their prayers.

In *Parshat VaYechi*, Yakov Avinu tells Yosef "Va-Ani hineh natati lekha shekhem ehad al ahekha, asher lakakhit mi-yad ha-emori be-charbi u-bekashti."¹

Yosef was given a double portion including Shechem, which Yakov took from the Emori with his sword and bow. In our standard versions of Onkelos, this verse is interpreted not as a physical sword and bow but rather as two terms for prayer: *tsetloti* and *ba'uti*. These two terms for prayer are often assumed to be synonymous but, in reality, they are quite different. *Tsetloti* refers to the common prayers that everyone says. *Ba'uti* however, refers to supplication, to the personal requests that an individual can add during his or her prayers (See *Avoda Zara* 8a). These additional prayers are not referred to with the sword metaphor, but with the metaphor of a

bow. Unlike a sword that can be effective whether or not the holder is skilled, a bow changes in effectiveness based on the skill of the holder. Great expertise is needed to properly ascertain the force with which one pulls the bowstring and the proper angle at which to hold the bow. It is the effect of the bow, not the sword, that varies based on the skill of the holder. Therefore, the personal prayers added by the individual to reflect the deepest recesses of his or her heart are characterized as *kashti*, a bow.

To my mind, we make a mistake by only focusing on the fixed nature of prayer and ignoring its personalized supplicatory nature. Students don't find prayer inspiring because they don't find it personal. As adults, we never learned how and when to add our personal needs to *tefilla*. Interestingly, in Rav Soloveitchik's essay *Ra'ayanot al Ha-Tefilla*,² he speaks of the personal supplicatory, individual nature of *tefilla*. The Rav describes how *tefilla* is meant to reflect the crises which lie at the depths of an individual's soul. He speaks about the personal needs that one is meant to convey in *tefilla*; of how an individual is supposed to go through profound soul searching in prayer. Our failure to convey the difference between my *tefilla* and your *tefilla*, our inability as educators to open our souls and share with our students what we pray for, may actually impede our community's ability to improve the sincerity and devotion of our prayers.

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1 Bereshit 48:22.

2 Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Ra'ayanot

al haTefilla," *HaDaron* 47 (1979), 84-106.