

From

Making Prayer Real

by Rabbi Mike Comins

Preface

If you had asked me, when I was a teenager, why I didn't regularly attend synagogue services, the answer would have been quick and decisive: it's BORRRing!

And I actually enjoyed services more than most. I liked Hebrew and singing; they sparked memories of the fun I had at Jewish summer camp. For ethnic reasons, I was really into being Jewish, and Jews gathered at synagogues.

But my list of complaints was far more compelling. I could mouth the Hebrew, but for the most part, I could not understand it. I didn't know what I prayed when I prayed it, only afterwards when I read the translation. And after reading the translation, I often felt that it would have been better if I had never looked. Why do people think that praising God is such a great thing to do, as if God, being God, needs us to suck up and "worship" Him? Wasn't *worship* the term for a pagan's relation to an idol or an immature person's relation to a rock star? And why "Him" instead of "Her"?

And who was this God, who did miracles that I knew were impossible, like splitting the Red Sea? Why would the prayer book try to impress me by making such a big deal out of something so unbelievable, and then brag about saving us by recounting the drowning of an army's worth of Egyptians? The prayers were written a long time ago for a very different audience.

All the personal petitions are phrased in "we" language rather than "I" language, as if they, too, knew better than to ask for personal attention. "Want to cure disease?" we thought in the late sixties and early seventies. "Then put your faith in university research hospitals." So soon after the Holocaust, the idea of a God who looks out for righteous individuals, indeed any individuals, was clearly folly.

The creative English readings were often interesting. At least, the first one was. By the third creative reading, my mind was elsewhere. And if I had read it a few times before at previous services, my attention was gone from the start. I was taught to be independent, to value individuality, to be authentic; that is, to do things because I knew that they were right and true. And here I was, reading prayers—the thoughts of someone else—in unison with a hundred other people.

No one talked about God. Not even the rabbi pretended that we were there to pray to this God that few believed in. Like most of us, I was there not because of the prayers but despite them. There was a perverse logic at play. If I do something so clearly unenjoyable as plodding through the service, I'm really demonstrating my loyalty to the Jewish community. Why else suffer through this?

The best part of the service was the sermon, because our rabbis knew better than to talk about anything spiritual. Instead, they spoke about politics, Israel, saving Soviet Jewry, Vietnam. The times were hot, and so were we. And then there was the *oneg* after services. Lots of brownies, plenty of friends, and, most fun of all, Israeli dancing. There were rewards for our suffering. But not enough to draw me to services when I didn't have to go.

Thirty-Five Years Later

Today, when I'm not spending Shabbat in nature, I attend a traditional egalitarian service with a full Torah reading. It takes more than three hours, but I do not wear a watch and it never ends too late for me.

If I'm really good, I rise early enough to meditate before leaving for services. On the drive over, I sing Jewish chants with my wife, Jody.

I enter the "sanctuary." It has no stained glass windows, no elaborate ark, no fancy pews; it is just a meeting room at a community center, some folding chairs around a few tables on a simple tile floor. I am happy to see my friends, the people who will

be there for me in hard times, as I will be for them; the people whose singing and dancing transformed my recent wedding.¹

Even though I am a bit late, I go back to the first prayers in the prayer book, the Siddur, because they are my favorites. I bless the *tallit*, feel it drop over my shoulders, and pray the morning blessings. Then I join in the singing during the first part of the service, largely psalms. In between songs, when others are praying the words of the psalms, I close my eyes and sink into a basic meditation. I put all of my attention on my body.

As I sit quietly or sing songs from the psalms that I know by heart, my mind empties and my body relaxes more and more. I do not talk to others. I focus on listening—to the singing and to my heart. Body awareness is critical. Where the body goes, the mind mirrors and the heart flows. It is not mysterious or difficult or in any way esoteric. It's just another way of being in the world. My body feels a certain way when happy, a different way when angry or stressed. This is how my body feels when I'm open and present, ready to feel God's presence. In the words of Jewish mystics, I am the empty vessel that God's spirit might fill. More important, I am familiar enough with this state that I can get there anytime I make the effort.

With the *Barchu* prayer I bring my focus back to the prayers. I read them in a state of relaxed concentration, allowing the prayers in this section to do their job: to center me, to remind me of my place in the world in relation to God, nature, humanity, and the Jewish People. If a particular verse strikes me, I stop and dwell on it for a bit.

As the *Shema* prayer enjoins me, I continue to listen for what God may be sending my way this morning. Awareness still on my body, I feel the spirit of my fellow daveners, my fellow pray-ers. I soak up their energy, which energizes me. As I sink deeper into this unstressed, peaceful state of being, my better emotions naturally emerge. I remember why I married my wife. I feel love for her and for my friends, and for the people in this room whom I don't know at all. I even remember how important it is to show a little love for myself.

As we approach the *Mi Chamocha* prayer, I take a moment to think back over the week that has passed since last Shabbat. I do a quick internal check-in. Am I taking care of myself, getting what I need, treating others well, living a life of service?

The prayers themselves at this point, about God splitting the Red Sea, I find problematic. So I forget the particulars and go for the general. This prayer is about redemption. As we sing it, I lose myself in the music and ask: What would redemption look like in my life in the next week? How would I change the way I go about things? I try to think small. Could I greet a barista with a smile instead of my usual morning scowl? Could I pay just a little more attention to someone in my life?

Everything comes into focus as I take three steps back, then three forward, and begin the *Amidah* prayer by saying, "*Adonai sefatai tiftach*" (O God, open my lips). During the week, I would pray my requests amid the traditional prayers. It is not difficult. After a half hour or so of listening, I usually know what I need, and when you know what you need, you know what to ask for—what to put out in the world that you hope will be fulfilled. But it is Shabbat, and according to the tradition, even God, as it were, has the day off. So I refocus on my body and just experience the grand emotions that are now filling my soul. I pray the words of "just being," the biblical quotes that proclaim the holiness of the Sabbath.

In this alert but somewhat trance-like state, I am in touch with the big picture of what it means to live a human life: the grandeur, the tragedy, the dreams, the pain, the mystery.... Like clockwork, gratitude wells up, and the tradition knows, for it places my favorite gratitude prayer, *modim anachnu lach* (we thank you), right at this juncture. I thank God not for achievements or any of the larger things I am grateful for, but for the gift that comes in the simplest form, my breath.

The *Amidah* ends, the Torah service begins, and my mind kicks in again for the intellectual endeavor of reading Torah, but in this contemplative state, I soak it in before I start analyzing

things. I work less at "understanding" and first try to "hear," to really listen to the words as if for the first time. As a person who naturally loves learning and philosophizing, this part of the service comes easiest to me. I eagerly await the insights of my fellow members of the minyan, one of whom will give a *d'var Torah*, a sermon, on the weekly Torah portion.

Being a Reform rabbi, I have many reasons for dropping *Musaf*, the repetition of the *Amidah* after the Torah reading. But my soul wants to continue in "prayer consciousness," to tap into and to extend the invigorating energy that is enlivening my body and relaxing my mind. A good prayer session builds, and now that I have spent two hours locating the best of myself—intellect, body, and heart—I am ready for my best praying.

I don't relate much to the words, the details of the sacrifice offered on Shabbat more than two thousand years ago in the Temple. But the theme is compelling, the climax of the whole morning. What am I willing to sacrifice for God? What am I willing to give to make the world a better place? Again, I think about what I can really do. What bad habit can I try to let go this week? What can I give to my loved ones? How can I respond better to an imperfect world? Calm and alert, but emotionally raw and defenseless, I offer my heartfelt prayer to make this life a good one.

The service thematically concludes with the *Aleynu*, the prayer for harmony and peace in the world. Filled with sadness and joy, I pray. If only it could really be!

Services aren't as lovely as I have described here every time, but neither is this an occasional happening that I attribute to the alignment of the stars, the luck of the draw or to a martyr-like perseverance (pray enough and occasionally something special will transpire). This is what happens most of the time. It does not depend on anything or anyone else but me. Usually I feel like God is really there; sometimes not. But when I make myself truly ready to receive God, it is always worth the effort. Getting in touch with my noblest emotions, and reaching toward the best aspirations of a human life, is its own reward.

Becoming a Prayer-Person

What a difference a few years makes! (Okay, a few decades, but who's counting.) What changed for me?

For years I attended services, when I attended services, because I liked the music, identified with the community, enjoyed seeing friends, and relished a good sermon and Torah discussion. Good reasons, indeed, but today all that is secondary for me. Now my central goal is to slow down, make some space for God, listen, and respond. My purpose is to interact with the Holy One.

Pursuing a direct relationship with God, something to which few liberal Jews of my generation aspired, brought me to the critical insight that changed my relation to prayer.

No one else can truly pray for me.

My prayer life changed when I took ownership of it and no longer left my heart's expression in the hands of rabbis, cantors, the Siddur, the building architect, the community, or whether a baby happens to be crying in the sanctuary today.

The Hebrew words *ani tefillah* appear in Psalms 109:4. Literally, they read, "I prayer," or in proper English, "I am prayer." Clearly this is an expression, and the phrase is translated "I am all prayer,"² or "I have nothing but prayer."³ But I like to take the translation literally in order to make a Midrash, a poetic interpretation. To say "I prayer" is to say "I am a prayer-person."

Exactly what constitutes a prayer-person is a broad question; it is the subject matter of this book. But for now, let me propose a working definition. A prayer-person is one whose very life is a prayer, a form of heightened awareness for whom the skills of prayer are a means to a life of virtue, joy, and service.

Personal Ownership

Over a seven-year period, I led High Holiday services for the Jewish Community of Jackson Hole in Wyoming. Overall, it was a wonderful experience that I treasure and look back on with joy.

But like most human endeavors, it was not all fun. Every summer, when it came time to gear up for Rosh HaShanah, I suffered an initial wave of depression. Partly it was the terror of writing two major sermons. But mostly it was the thought of leading services.

During the year, I loved the services that I was privileged to lead. Over the months, the regulars studied Hebrew, learned the prayers, mastered the melodies, and further developed the wonderful sense of community that only grows in a place with so few Jews. At some point in every service, I would close my eyes, stop singing, and just listen. Whereas only a few people sang when I first arrived, now I bathed in a full congregational chorus. Amid my friends, I could relax. As the prayer leader, managing a public ceremony for tens of people, it is often impossible to let go and pray. But instead of the congregation getting in the way, I was lifted by their participation and singing. I was one fortunate rabbi.

Then came the High Holidays. The regulars were outnumbered by "once-a-year" Jews who didn't know the music, didn't know the liturgy, and didn't care much for prayer. The focus would not be on the prayers; it would be on the clergy.

While we all like a talented prayer leader, clergy-centered services are problematic. If I go to services expecting the rabbi to impress me with her words and the cantor to move me with his musicianship, I am like a critic at a movie. When a good film touches me, I am spiritually enriched. If not, not. It mostly depends on the film. But if I pray like a painter about to draw on her canvas, I am responsible for finding my inspiration and engaging the practice. My prayer may not always turn out great, but even "failure" moves me forward in the artistic quest. The critical point: it depends mostly on me—my longing, my desire, my creativity, my talent, my sincerity, my devotion to the art. We have a choice: to consume art or to become an artist; to consume the synagogue product or to become a prayer-person, an artist of the soul whose sincere prayer serves the community as much as the community supports our prayer.

5. Choose a minimum number for your daily list. To start, try five.
6. You might start a gratitude journal to list them, and keep it at your bedside. This allows you to look back over time. If saying thanks spurs other thoughts, write on!

PRACTICE 3

Thank-You Walk

1. Take a walk around the neighborhood, your garden, or the house.
2. Approach a stone or plant or creature and direct your full attention toward it. You might take a moment to appreciate its beauty before speaking.
3. Say thanks, using your own words. “Thank you, flower, for the joy you bring me.” To an old tree, you might say, “Thank you, grandmother, for your shade and shelter.” Just saying “thanks” with sincerity is enough.
4. You might touch the pet or plant or stone while speaking.

On the virtues of using “you” language in addressing trees and mountains, see my *A Wild Faith: Jewish Ways into Wilderness, Wilderness Ways into Judaism* (Jewish Lights), chapter 4 and appendix 2.

Body Awareness

An experience of God, like any experience, can only be in the present. Mindfulness, concentrating on the here and now, is critical to prayer. But much of prayer is a mental process, an exercise in verbal and conceptual thinking, the very place we might drift into random thoughts of past and future. The antidote to mental boredom and distraction is to connect to our senses, placing at least part of our attention on what we hear, see, and feel on our skin. When we find a way to keep some of our attention on the body while praying, we can daven with greater focus and intensity.

world. This view is represented in *Making Prayer Real*, and not only by Orthodox Jews. At the opposite end of the spectrum, usually mystics and contemplatives (including the rationalist, philosophic variety), God does not possess at least one of the "all" attributes that make the suffering of the innocent so problematic: all-knowing, all-powerful, all-present (past, present, and future), and all-good. God lacks either the decision-making kind of mind we humans possess, or the desire to intervene in the course of the world, or the ability to do so. For them, prayer is directed at the human heart, the only place it can affect. Others take a middle position of one sort or another, believing that prayer indeed aims to change humans, but this has a cosmic effect on the world and on God, who does have the power to intervene in worldly affairs. This is the neo-Hasidic, mystical position that I accept. We shape the flow of divine energy in the world through the internal struggles of our hearts. Most of the teachers interviewed for this book accept some version of the latter two positions.

The purpose of this grossly oversimplified typology is to recognize that prayer takes different forms in Jewish tradition, drawing on different experiences and subsequent explanations of how God works in the world. But the differences should not be over-emphasized. When we turn to the main questions of this book—how prayer functions and what it tries to accomplish—there is a surprising amount of agreement. Even the mystics, who see no separation between themselves and God, find it useful to employ the second person "You" language of address that assumes a dualistic understanding of God as other. And of course, those who believe in the "conventional" take on prayer have no reason, or desire, to deny the effects of prayer on the human heart.

One way to get to the bottom of what prayer is, is to ask, what does prayer do?

All prayer—when we pay attention, whether personal or liturgical—is ultimately a form of speaking the truth. It makes us

aware of what is going on in our lives in this moment—so that we can see clearly and respond appropriately.

RABBI JONATHAN P. SLATER

Prayer changes and affects the person who prays because prayer opens the heart. Prayer lets down the barriers between our intimate longings, our private pain, our anxious clutching fears, and everything else. The very interiority of a prayer experience (even a prayer as brief as "Wow") opens and exposes our tender hearts.

RABBI SHERYL LEWART

Underneath its stated intentions of praising, thanking, or beseeching God, underneath its functional goals of fulfilling our religious obligations, spurring us to action, bringing us comfort in times of stress, improving our character traits, or bonding with the historical and the present Jewish community, prayer is first and foremost a spiritual practice that lays the foundation for attaining any of the above. In its essence, prayer is the practice of becoming more aware and more compassionate. It is a way of speaking truth and opening the heart.

How does prayer accomplish this task? Particularly for those who do not hold a traditional theology, we must ask, how does prayer actually work?

Aligning with God

I like the Leona Medina image. If you saw somebody pulling a boat to the shore and were mistaken about mechanics and motion, you might think that he was pulling the shore to the boat. And that's what prayer is like. You think that you're pulling God to you, but in fact, if you pray well, you pull yourself to God.

RABBI DAVID J. WOLPE

For most, particularly the mystics, prayer is understood as a method to attune or align ourselves with God.

Prayer can be taking that contemplative moment before a meal or a boardroom meeting. We can say to ourselves, "I'm going to take a moment and center myself—what am I about to do and why?" In this moment we are locating a self often buried under the mundane. Prayer gets us in touch with that deeper self.

RABBI SHAWN ZEVIT

The one who prays is like the shofar. The shofar itself has no independent significance or power. It is only meaningful when someone blows into it. The sound that emerges is recognized and has a meaning. We are the shofar—and it is God who moves through us, "blows" on us to generate the prayer that emerges. Thus, prayer is the closing of a circle, the making of a connection between self and Self, creating a united whole.

RABBI JONATHAN P. SLATER

One method of aligning with God is to change our usual perspective and bring attention to matters of the holy.

What prayer means to me is turning myself so that I'm no longer the center of the story. I'm reminded of that kid's book *Zoom*, where you start out looking at a farmhouse, and then you go back and see that it's really a picture on a wall in a room, and then you go back further and see the room is in a house, and further and further until eventually, you're seeing this from "God's perspective." And suddenly, the universe is completely different and the place of that farmhouse is a completely different story. At my best, prayer is about getting out of my own way and, as much as possible, trying to see the world for a moment through the metaphoric eyes of God.

RABBI LAURA GELLER

Practically speaking, the most important way to examine a religious question is, "How does this actually work?" Prayer

is a spiritual technology. It changes the heart. Before prayer, we might be thinking about business relationships or the mortgage or whatever else, and then during prayer, our mind is turned, either by a formal liturgy or our own intentions, to other subjects more essential, more real. The mind has been cleansed in a way. I like to joke that prayer is the original mental floss.

JAY MICHAELSON

You Cannot *Think* God

None of the teachers interviewed see prayer as an intellectual experience.

If you ask most people, it's the sound of the prayers and the music of them and not the cognitive content, and frankly, although we comment on them all the time, the cognitive content of many prayers is not so impressive. Other parts of the tradition are much more impressive. It affirms certain beliefs, but it's not supposed to be intellectually tantalizing. That's not the purpose of it. In fact, if it were, it would sort of defeat the purpose of it.

RABBI DAVID J. WOLPE

Indeed, the liturgist uses words and concepts, as does the poet, not to convey information but to evoke emotion, to both embody and celebrate the Divine-human relationship.

I'm not trying to understand the words. I'm trying to be the words.

RABBI SHEFA GOLD

I don't pray to God with my prayers. I experience God through my prayers, with my community. When my voice is joining with twenty other people's voices, chanting the *Amidah*, I