

Learning the Art of Prayer  
A High Holy Day Sermon  
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The High Holy Day prayer book informs us that three things are necessary if we are to obtain God's forgiveness. The three things required of us are t'filah, tzedakah, ut'shuvah – prayer, righteousness, and repentance (or committed return.) The modern American Jew is able to understand the last two requirements, <sup>Tzedakah + T'shuvah.</sup> We are action oriented, so when our tradition says that we must participate in righteous deeds and make right the wrongs we have done, we know what we have to do, but prayer is another matter. Americans, generally, have little experience with the life of the spirit, so we American Jews are embarrassed when we even contemplate the necessity for prayer.

In most American Jewish families, prayer has become such an unusual thing that for some of our children, it has gained an air of mystery. Prayer is now categorized with things that are different, anti-establishment, exotic. For this reason, amongst others, many Jewish collegians are determined to find out about prayer, and since their parents can't tell them anything about it, they go to non-Jewish sources for information and experimentation. They may even join one of the cults.

The chief problem for us sophisticated American Jews is that we have difficulty addressing ourselves to God. When we were young, we got the impression that God is an old man with a beard up there in the sky, and we have come not to believe that. Still later, we were told that God was some kind of impersonal computer, which hands out an answer to prayer when you put a coin in the prayer machine. We have learned that there is no dispensing machine in the sky. Then, we decided that if God is not either of these two things, the sometimes kindly, sometimes punitive old man or the dispensing machine, then, God simply doesn't exist. Having no God to address in our prayers, we have abandoned the spiritual life.

Most of us have rejected our childhood concept of God, but few of us have gone to the trouble to try to develop an adult concept of God. Some of you know of my experience at the University of Florida with a young man who was anxious to demonstrate his revolt against his family and the establishment by shouting out at a discussion among students, "I don't believe in God!" As a former atheist, I was not at all shaken by this declaration. I merely asked the young man <sup>the</sup> question, "What is the God in which you do not believe?" The young man was not so accomplished an atheist as to

be able to understand my question. He had thought that when you reject God, you reject God. A more mature person knows that when we reject God, we are merely rejecting a concept of God to which we once held. The more religious person sheds a concept of God as he grows in understanding and is able to conceive of God in higher terms. Ideally, this process of alternating rejection and re-identification goes on forever, as we grow in understanding.

Martin Buber, the famous Jewish philosopher of some fifty years ago, has taught, "The reality of God is not limited to our concept of Him." God is what he <sup>H</sup> (or she) <sup>S</sup> is, and the best of us will never understand God in his total being. Even Moses was not privileged to know all about God. The <sup>B</sup> bible tells us that when Moses pleaded with God to reveal his name so that Moses could tell the Israelites who had sent him, God answered, "Why do you ask for my name? I am not some god of magic that you can control me. I am not some small god that you can define in a formula and wrap up in a box. I am what I am. I am the creator of all things. I am He who is always present. I am <sup>B</sup> being. That is my name." <sup>#</sup>

<sup>AS THE EGYPTIANS DO</sup>

Einstein, the great scientist of our age, rejected his childhood concept of God, of course, but he was no atheist, not by a long shot. For Einstein, God was the mastermind <sup>of</sup> before the universe.

*# Paraphrased by the author*

“As children of God,” Einstein said, “We have the responsibility to learn all we can about God’s universe, but we will never understand the universe more than primitively. As a scientist, Einstein knew that the essence of religiosity was the commitment to the search, to search out the wonders of God’s creation, knowing that the ultimate discovery would always be beyond us.

The Jewish mystics have taught in their way that God wants us to go in search of Him. They taught this truth through a story. The story goes this way. Once a little girl was playing hide and seek with her friends. She hid behind a tree and waited. She waited and waited, but nothing happened. The little girl began to cry. A man passed by and seeing the girl asked her, “Why are you crying little girl?” The girl answered, “I hid, but no one came to find me.” This is a truly sad story. So it is with God, the Jewish mystics teach. He hides, but no one comes to find Him. We act if God simply isn’t in our game.

For Einstein, God is hiding, so to speak, hiding behind the laws of the universe. Try to discover those laws, and you will find evidence of God. For the psalmist, author of the psalms in our Bible, God hides behind the natural phenomena of nature. Declared the psalmist, “When I behold the heavens, the work of

your fingers, oh Lord, when I behold the sun and the moon and the stars...I am moved to ask, what are we mere human beings, ~~oh Lord~~, that you think of us and what are we, <sup>mere</sup> mortals that <sup>you are</sup> believes that ~~a part of God is in everything that is created~~. The mystic understands that it is his task to fan the divine flame within his own soul. Prayer, said the Hasid, is the involuntary reaching of this divine spark within ~~me~~ <sup>(and yours)</sup> towards ~~us~~ <sup>each of us</sup> towards that greater spiritual magnet that is God.

For Einstein, God could be seen in the order of the universe. God is that divine spark that is within you. Martin Buber wrote, "Whenever two human beings touch with genuine caring and love, ~~God~~ flows between them." For the mystic, God is that more of our better self that pulls us to love and compassion. For the <sup>Hebrew</sup> prophet, however, God is something else again. For the prophet, God is the call to righteousness; the moral imperative. Jeremiah knew there was a God because he couldn't resist the need to criticize king and landowner for their oppression of the poor. Jeremiah said, "When I determine that I will no longer cry out in God's name, there is, as it were, a fire in my bones, and I weary myself to hold it in, but I cannot." The <sup>Hebrew</sup> prophet had to proclaim God's message of justice. He had no alternative, for to him the proof of God was the inner compulsion he felt to act in behalf of the poor and oppressed.

# our paraphrase

The prophet Isaiah described God as saying to the people, "I cried out 'Behold Me, behold Me,' but no one saw and no one heard!" God is hidden, but He wants to be discovered. He cries out in a thousand different ways, "Look, here I am. Only recognize that I am here." To be religious is to go in search of God. Where is He to be found? Our prayer of sanctification, the Kiddushah, has the answer, "m'lo kol ha'aretz k'vodo, the whole earth is full of His Presence."

Some of us can find evidence of God in the large and great things. Others of us find God in the little things. Some of us know that only God could have created the universe with its billions of galaxies. Others of us know that only God could have created the seed. A fortunate few of us can see evidence of God in both large and small things. The scientist knows that a single microscopic cell of a living thing contains all of the intrinsic order and refined excellence of the grown plant or animal or human. Indeed, the process of cloning demonstrates that one cell is like a seed and can produce the whole plant or living being. The smallest thing in the universe is not less miraculous than the largest thing and shows equally evidence of the grand Planner. If God is concerned about ~~human king~~ <sup>humanity</sup>, He is no less concerned about the individual, for in

one person is revealed the entire magnificence of the universe. The Talmud expresses some of this sensitivity when it teaches, "He who kills one human being is as if he had destroyed the world."

There are those who say to us, "My religion is following the golden rule." Such people work outside the framework, which includes God and prayer. Their view is not without some merit, but it seems to me that a person who cuts himself off from the creative spirit of the universe misses a great excitement in life. To believe that what one does is important, not only for its own sake, but because it is important to God, had to lend a certain drama and depth to life.

Consider now this story in point. Once a reporter visited a new construction site in New York City. The reporter decided to ask each worker what he thought of his work and what he or she was doing. He went up to a bricklayer and asked, "What are you doing?" The bricklayer answered, "I am placing these bricks according to the pattern of the architect, one next to the other." The reporter then went to the foreman and asked him, "What is your job?" The foreman answered, "I supervise all of these workmen and try to coordinate their efforts." The reporter went in

turn to the plasterers and the paperhangers and all answered in the same way. They all described the details of their particular job. Finally, the reporter went up to an old man who was stirring cement in a big trough, "Tell, me, old man, <sup>the reporter asked,</sup> what are you doing?" The old man continued to stir the cement over and over, carefully and painstakingly; then, the old man smiled and said, "I'm building a <sup>H</sup> house of God!" Only then did the reporter discover that the construction project was a church <sup>or</sup> of synagogue.

The secret of the religious way of life, as Judaism sees it, is that it can glorify the most simple task. One way to pray is to work in such a way that you understand that what you are doing, you are doing not only for yourself and your family, but Leshem Shamayim, "for the sake of heaven," for God.

The doctor who serves merely to make a living does not pray, but the doctor who understands that he is God's agent, that he <sup>or she</sup> is the hands, so to speak, of the healing God, this doctor prays as he/<sup>she</sup> works. The mother who rears ~~here~~ children without thought of their miraculous character and without thought of what she is contributing to society through her child, does not pray. But if the mother understands that she is charged with the holiest of all tasks, the shaping of a child's mind and character, and if she understands

that she is the agent of God, then, her working and loving is her prayer.

We began by talking about prayer, and here we are talking about a frame of mind as applied to our own work. What has this to do with prayer? Everything. There are different ways to pray. We pray in words, in thought, and in deeds. The boy who dashes across a field, filled with the glory of his strength and the open freedom of the field – prays, without saying a word. The mother and father who behold their firstborn child and shed tears of joy – prays. The poet who beholds the beauty of nature and transcribes his feeling into words – prays through his or her poem. The artist prays through his painting. The musician prays through the execution of his music. Certainly, when Einstein contemplated the accuracy of his formula depicting the amount of energy that would emerge from the splitting of an atom, certainly in that moment of discovery, Einstein had a religious experience. At the deepest heart of <sup>the</sup> prayerful mood, words, thoughts, and actions can blend into one.

In a sense, one can live a prayerful life and never utter a word of prayer, but how wonderful it is to be able to verbalize what one feels! Learning to pray verbally is somewhat like learning to say,

“I love you.” At first, we may resist saying the words long after we really know we are in love; <sup>to</sup> But once we say the magic words, the feeling receives a new impetus. We know and feel something we did not fully experience before. Similarly, the Jewish mystics teach, “Call God your father, until He becomes your father.” Say the words of the prayer, even when you are not absolutely certain of your convictions. The chances are your feelings are way ahead of your willingness to verbalize. Try the words softly the first time and then, gradually shout them from the rooftops. Try saying something like:

“God of our ancestors, how grateful am I for the gift of life, for the ability to see and hear and think and love, <sup>Gifts</sup> which <sup>you</sup> gave me personally.

*How grateful  
am I for all  
the gifts*

Try to say:

“How grateful I am for the presence and warmth of loved ones around me, for family and friends – who are also <sup>your</sup> children. How miraculous they are and how precious.”

Having said these words of gratitude, perhaps, we will then be in a position to say a few more words. Perhaps, we could add something like:

“Help me, Oh Lord, to achieve the understanding that whatever I do in this world, I do not only for my sake, but, also for ~~my~~ your sake.

And let me shoulder my tasks, however painful and difficult they may be, with the knowledge that you are aware of my pain and burdens – and that ~~you~~ you are there to help me face them.”

The prayer book says that three things are required to gain God’s approval at this season, righteousness, repentance (or committed return) and prayer. Perhaps, these three things, after all, are really

*different aspects of*  
1 only one thing.