

What a Jew Believes - Practicing Faith in a Skeptical World

Session 3

"Prayer - Does God listen? And Why is Shul Always the Same??"



Part One - The Origin of Jewish Prayer

וַיִּגַּשׁ אַבְרָהָם וַיֹּאמֶר הֲאַף תִּסְּפֶה צְדִיק עִם־רָשָׁע: אוֹלַי יֵשׁ חֲמִשִּׁים צְדִיקִים בְּתוֹךְ הָעִיר הָאֵת
תִּסְּפֶה וְלֹא־תִשָּׂא לְמַקּוֹם לְמַעַן חֲמִשִּׁים הַצְּדִיקִים אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבָּהּ:

Abraham came forward and said, “Will You sweep away the innocent along with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it?”

1. Genesis 18

So although God knew that all the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra were evil, Abraham didn't know that. Therefore God empowers Abraham to make the speech in their defence. Only somebody who protests, who sees the reality of evil from a human perspective; only somebody who sees not only the palace but also the flames – only that person understands the fundamental proposition of Judaism that we are here not to accept the world but to change the world. And, yes we agree that in the fullness of time or in the world to come, we would understand why bad things happen but we cannot envisage the world to come! We cannot understand the interconnectedness of things. We haven't got that infinity to wait.

As the Yiddish prayer goes – it’s my favourite prayer of all – Ribono shel olam, I know You’re going to help me, but please could You help me until You help me?! Our perspective is very fragmentary, fragile and short-term and, therefore, we do not understand. Therefore, evil seems to us real and it is real for us. And God affirms our humanity.

I tell you that I as a Jew refuse to accept either alternative. I refuse to accept them because either of them would allow me to live at peace with the world and I believe it is morally impossible to live at peace in a world that contained an Auschwitz. Therefore, I hope I have shown you how this faith of multiple perspectives, of cognitive dissonance, which is lived out in time through the conversation between Earth and Heaven and lived out in dialogue, is the energising tension at the heart of Judaism. It is what drives us to act and try to change the world. If we see the dissonance between our world and God’s world, between the flames and the palace, between the ‘is’ and the ‘ought’, then we know that that tension can be resolved only by action which is inspired by revelation, which moves us closer to redemption.

2. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Part Two - Prayer as Faith

The essence of belief in God is that only He can ultimately guarantee our livelihood or cure our diseases. And when a person does not trust in God and does not pray to Him, it is as if he is denying belief in God for the sake of belief in something else...

3. Rav Moshe Feinstein

The foundation of prayer is not because we (necessarily) need those things. Rather, it is because it is true that He is the One who Grants intelligence, Desires repentance, Forgives, Redeems Israel, Heals the sick, Blesses the Year, Gathers in the exiles, we too yearn for these things.....Ourselves we remove to the side, and express this Truth, for this we acknowledge and we yearn.

4. Rav Charlap Mei Marom 13, 22

Either God has determined that a person shall receive a given benefit or He has not so determined. If He has determined, there is no need for prayer; and if He has not so determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that He should now determine to benefit the person when He had not so determined before?

But this opinion is not true, for the influences from above come down upon the recipient when he is on a certain spiritual level and state of preparation to receive them. And if a person does not prepare himself, he withholds this good from himself. For example, if it has been determined from on High that a person's crops shall prosper in a given year, and he neglects to plow or sow his land that year, then God may bring the most abundant rain upon the land but his crops will not prosper, seeing that he has not plowed or sowed. He withheld the good from himself because he did not prepare himself to receive it ... In the same way, when a certain evil is determined upon someone, it is also conditional upon either his being wicked in a certain degree, or to his being predisposed to it.

5. R Yosef Albo

If man frees his thoughts from worldly matters, obtains a knowledge of God in the right way, and rejoices in that knowledge, it is impossible that any kind of evil should befall him while he is with God, and God with him. When he does not meditate on God, when he is separated from God, then God is also separated from him; then he is exposed to any evil that might befall him; for it is only that intellectual link with God that secures the presence of Providence and protection from evil accidents.

6. Guide For The Perplexed 3,51

Part Three - How to Pray

Hitpallel, from which "Tefillah" is derived, originally meant to deliver an opinion about oneself, to judge oneself or an inner attempt at so doing such as the hitpael (reflexive) form of the Hebrew verb frequently denotes ... Thus it denotes to step out of active life in order to attempt to gain a true judgment about oneself ... about one's relationship to God and the world, and the world to oneself ... In English we call Tefillah "prayer," but this word only incompletely expresses the concept "to pray," i.e., to ask for something is only a minor section of Tefillah.

7. R SR Hirsch

Over the past decades, a number of researchers have tried to document the effects of prayer on the targets of prayer, a controversial research program that has predictably yielded very meager results (Masters, Spielmans, & Goodson, 2006). The present work indicates that prayer actually can have meaningful effects, but among a different group of individuals --those doing the praying. Indeed, prayer was found to have pervasive effects on the emotional experience, social behavior, and cognitive appraisals of praying individuals. Whenever people are confronting their own anger and tendencies to aggress, they might consider the age-old advice of praying for one's enemies. Even when such prayers do not directly benefit those enemies, prayer may still help people to co-exist more peacefully

8. "Pray for those who mistreat you": effects of prayer on anger and aggression. Bremner, Koole SL, Bushman BJ. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 2011

Jewish prayer always starts with praise. It takes different forms in different services but it's always there before anything else. Why? Because on the bad days we can be distracted by worry, depressed by anxiety, clouded by fear. We turn in on ourselves, as if we were shut in a small, airless room, unable to see the sunlight or breathe the free air. I'm the last person in the world to minimise the seriousness of depression. Along with Simon and Garfunkel, I know what it is to sing, "Hello darkness, my old friend."

Which is why prayer as praise is so important. It says: don't look in; look out. Don't look down; look up. The world is full of light, said the Jewish mystics, if we only know how to open our eyes.

These psalms say: see the glory of creation. Look at all the beauty that surrounds you. Listen to the song of a bird. Look carefully at the beauty of a tree, its leaves shimmering in the breeze. Pause and inhale the sheer miracle of being. Remind yourself, slowly, gently: I am here. The universe is here. I am alive. I am free. I am capable of love and I am loved. And I will praise the force that made all this and allowed me to be here and see it.

9. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

Part Four - When Prayer Isn't Answered

Rav visited a certain town He decreed a fast, but the rain did not come. The prayer leader came before him He said, "He Who makes the wind blow" – and the wind blew. He said, "He Who makes the rain fall" – and the rain fell. He said to him, "What do you do?" He said to him, "I teach children. I teach the poor as I teach the rich, And if anyone cannot afford to pay, I teach him free of charge. And for any child who is struggling I have a pond with a school of fish. I win the student over with my fish: I call to him, and appeal to him, until he learns to read."

10. Talmud Ta'anit 24b

אָמַר לִיהוּ רַב פָּפָא לְאַבְיִי: מַאי שְׁנָא רַאשׁוֹנִים דְּאַתְרַחֲשִׁישׁ לְהוּ נִסָּא, וּמַאי שְׁנָא אַנְן דְּלֹא מְתַרְחִישׁ לָן נִסָּא?...וְאֵילוּ רַב יְהוּדָה כִּי הָוָה שְׁלִיף חַד מְסַאנִיָּה, אֶתִּי מְטָרָא, וְאַנְן קָא מְצַעְרִינְן בְּפִשִׁין וּמְצוּחַ קָא צְוָחִינְן, וְלִית דְּמִשְׁגַּח בְּן.
אָמַר לִיהוּ: קִמְאַי הוּוּ קָא מְסָרִי בְּפִשִׁיָּהּוּ אֶקְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם, אַנְן לָא מְסָרִינְן בְּפִשִׁין אֶקְדוּשַׁת הַשֵּׁם.

Rav Pappa said to Abaye: What is different about the earlier generations, for whom miracles occurred and what is different about us, for whom miracles do not occur....when Rav Yehuda would remove one of his shoes the rain would immediately fall, whereas we torment ourselves and cry out and no one notices us. Abaye said to Rav Pappa: The previous generations were wholly dedicated to the sanctification of God's name, while we are not as dedicated to the sanctification of God's name

11. Talmud Berachot 20a

כָּל שֶׁאֵפְשֵׁר לוֹ לְבַקֵּשׁ רַחֲמִים עַל חֲבִירוֹ וְאִינוּ מְבַקֵּשׁ נִקְרָא חוּטֵא שְׁנֵאמַר, (שְׁמוּאֵל א יב, כג) גַּם אֲנִכִּי חָלִילָה לִי מִחֻטֵּא לֵה' מִחְדוּל לְהִתְפַּלֵּל בְּעַדְכֶם

Rabbah b. Hinnana the Elder also said in the name of Rab : Whoever has it in his power to pray on behalf of his neighbour and fails to do so is called a sinner ;as it is said, Moreover as for me, far be it from me that I should sin against the Lord in ceasing to pray for you" (I Sam. xii. 23).

12. Berachot 12b

A Word of Warning...

שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים מְזַכְרִים עֲוֹנוֹתָיו שֶׁל אָדָם, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן: קִיר נָטוּי, וְעֵיּוֹן תְּפִלָּה, וּמוֹסֵר דֵּין עַל חֵבִירוֹ לְשָׁמַיִם

Rabbi Yitzhak said: Three matters evoke a person's sins, and they are: an inclined wall that is about to collapse, expecting prayer to be accepted, as that leads to an assessment of his status and merit, and passing a case against another to Heaven, as praying for Heaven to pass judgment on another person.

13. Talmud Berachot 55a

Part Five - Why Is Shul Always The Same?

אֵיתָמַר רַבִּי יוֹסִי בְּרַבִּי חַנִּינָא אָמַר תְּפִלוֹת אֲבוֹת תְּקַנּוּם רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן לׁוֹי אָמַר תְּפִלוֹת כִּנְגַד תְּמִידִין תְּקַנּוּם

It was stated: Rabbi Yosi b. Rabbi Hanina said: The Patriarchs instituted the prayer. Rabbi Yehoshua b. Levi said: prayer was instituted corresponding to the daily sacrifices.

14. Talmud Berachot 26b

The obligation in this precept is that every person should daily, according to his ability, offer up supplication and prayer; first uttering praises of God, then, with humble supplication and petition ask for all that he needs, and finally offer praise and thanksgiving to the Eternal for the benefits already bestowed upon him in rich measure.

When the people of Israel went into exile in the days of the wicked Nebuchednezzar, they mingled with the Persians, Greeks and other nations. In those foreign countries, children were born to them, whose language was confused. Everyone's speech was a mixture of many tongues. No one was able, when he spoke, to express his thoughts adequately in any one language, otherwise than incoherently, as it is said, "And their children spoke half in the speech of Ashdod and they could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people" (Nehemiah 13:24). Consequently, when anyone of them prayed in Hebrew, he was unable adequately to express his needs or recount the praises of God, without mixing Hebrew with other languages. When Ezra and his

Council realized this condition, they ordained the Eighteen Benedictions in their present order.

The object aimed at was that these prayers should be in an orderly form in everyone's mouth, that all should learn them, and thus the prayer of those who were not expert in speech would be as perfect as that of those who had command of a chaste style. For the same reason, they arranged [in a fixed form] all the blessings and prayers for all Jews so that the substance of every blessing should be familiar and current in the mouth of one who is not expert in speech.

15. Rambam, Laws of Prayer

The prayerbook, which determines the content of the Mitzvah of prayer, does not express the spontaneous outpouring of the soul. It contains a text of fixed prayer, imposed upon one as a duty and not conditioned by his spiritual or material needs or by his feeling. The same eighteen benedictions are recited by the bridegroom before his wedding ceremony, by the widower returning from the funeral of his wife, and the father who has just buried his only son. Recitation of the identical set of psalms is the daily duty of the person enjoying the beauties and bounty of this world and the one whose world has collapsed. The same order of supplications is prescribed for those who feel the need for them and those who do not.

16. Yeshayuh Leibowitz

The power of the Amidah comes from the words themselves. The prayer was carefully composed by highly advanced spiritual individuals so as to enable a maximum relationship with God. As we shall see, in the first paragraph, a person is drawn closer and closer to God, until he feels the presence of God all around him, penetrating his very being. Since the Amidah was composed as a meditation prayer, it is necessary to repeat it as often as possible. It is for this reason that it was required that the same prayer be said three times every day. As discussed earlier, one of the reasons a mantra works is that when the words are said over and over, the mind develops a special resonance with them. The words can then be said automatically, without special effort or concentration. Since the mind is not concerned with saying the words, it can allow itself to be filled with their meaning

17. R Aryeh Kaplan, Jewish Meditation

Part Six - Prayer as Faith, Reconsidered

Prayer changes the world because it changes us. At its height, it is a profoundly transformative experience. If we have truly prayed, we come in the course of time to know that the world was made, and we were made, for a purpose; that God, though immeasurably vast, is also intensely close; that “though my father and mother may reject me, God will gather me in”; that God is with us in our efforts, and that we do not labor in vain. We know, too, that we are part of the community of faith, and with us are four thousand years of history and the prayers and hopes of those who came before us. However far we feel from God, He is there behind us, and all we have to do is turn to face Him. Faith is born and lives in prayer, and faith is the antidote to fear: “The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?”

18. R Sacks

The reason for the raising of one's voice during prayer, and the reason for synagogues, and the merit of public prayer is this – that people should have a place where they can congregate and thank (acknowledge) God who has created them and brought them into existence, and they will publicize this and declare before Him, 'We are your creatures.' This is the meaning of what (the Sages) said, "'They called to God mightily' – from here we learn that prayer must be out loud; for the brazen overcome the meek."

19. Nachmanides

וַיְדִי מִשָּׁה כְּבִדִּים וַיִּקְחוּ-אֶבֶן וַיִּשְׁימוּ תַּחְתָּיו וַיֵּשֶׁב עָלֶיהָ וְאַהֲרֹן וְחֹר וְתָמְכוּ בְּיָדָיו מִזֶּה אֶחָד
וּמִזֶּה אֶחָד וַיְהִי יָדָיו אֲמוּנָה עַד-בֹּא הַשָּׁמֶשׁ:

But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set.

20. Shemot 17,12