The Paradox of Prayer

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This past Shabbat (July 9, 2022), I had the privilege to lead the newly-created Foundations Minyan at Congregation Beth Aaron in Teaneck, New Jersey. It is an intermediate service--one that adds learning and discussion to a full Shabbat morning prayer service. Approximately 100 people were in attendance, demonstrating the deep thirst so many people have for an enhancement of their prayer and synagogue experience. The service was created by Michelle Diamond and her friends and family in memory of her late husband, Andy Diamond.

Here is a written-up version of the sermon on prayer I gave.

Rabbi Hayyim Angel, National Scholar

THE PARADOX OF PRAYER

The Talmud reports an unusual and somewhat troubling anecdote about petitionary prayer that contains important insight into the nature of asking things of God:

> Rabbi Mani often used to attend [the discourses] of Rabbi Yitzhak ben Eliashab, and he complained: The rich members of the family of my father-in-law are annoying me. The latter exclaimed: May they become poor! They

became poor. Later on [Rabbi Mani] complained: Now they press me [for support], and Rabbi Isaac exclaimed: Let them become rich! They became rich.

[On another occasion] he complained: My wife is no longer attractive to me. Rabbi Isaac asked: What is her name? He replied: Hannah. Whereupon Rabbi Isaac exclaimed: May Hannah become beautiful! And she became beautiful. He then complained: She now has become too arrogant [from her beauty], whereupon Rabbi Isaac exclaimed: If that is so, let Hannah revert to her [former] ugliness! And she became once again ugly.

Two disciples used to attend [the discourses of] Rabbi Isaac ben Eliashab, and they said to him, Master, pray that we may become very wise. He replied: Once I had the power to do this, but now I no longer possess this power. (*Ta'anit* 23b)

Rabbi Yitzchak Blau addresses different levels of this story. At its surface, the Talmud teaches that we often want things that contain mixed blessings. What initially seems best for us in one area often comes at high price in another.

At another level, the final component of the narrative—the disciples who requested a prayer for wisdom and were rebuffed—teaches that even matters that are truly important cannot be corrected with the use of prayer as a magic wand. To attain wisdom, one must devote oneself to study, rather than praying for instant knowledge and judgment. The talmudic anecdote, then, teaches that first, we must be careful what we pray for, and second, that we must look inward and work to achieve genuine change, rather than depending exclusively on prayer (*Fresh Fruit & Vintage Wine: The Ethics and Wisdom of the Aggada* [Jersey City, NJ: Ktav, 2009], pp. 219–221).

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This story triggers a far more powerful question regarding prayer. Do we really hope to influence God? God knows what we lack without our needing to inform Him. Moreover, God will not necessarily respond to our petitions, and certainly does not need our words of praise.

A rationalist would say that we cannot influence God at all; prayer is primarily intended to remind us of our complete reliance on God, to transform us, and to hold ourselves up to the ideals contained in the prayers. A kabbalist would say that God allows human prayer to change the course of events. Many biblical narratives give this impression as well, as God often responds to prayers.

A shortcoming of the rationalist view is the dissonance that ensues, since our prayers are in fact largely comprised of praise and petition. In the kabbalistic approach, it is all too easy for prayer to take on a pagan character where we think we are manipulating God, treating Him like an unusually well-stocked vending machine. Additionally, many prayers are not answered as one would have liked. The false expectation that prayer achieves direct positive results may cause one to lose faith.

The Talmud (*Berakhot* 32a) presents a healthier approach: “Rabbi Simlai expounded: One should always first recount the praise of the Holy One, blessed be He, and then pray. From where do we know this? From Moses’ plea to enter the Land” (Deuteronomy 3:23–24). Ironically, the Talmud cites the classic example of a prayer that was *not* accepted! And of all people, Moses was praying! As heartbreaking as that episode is, it presents a vital lesson showing that even Moses did not always get what he wanted when he prayed.

Following this lead, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains that “The foundation of prayer is not the conviction of its effectiveness but the belief that through it we approach God intimately and the miraculous community embracing finite man and his Creator is born. The basic function of prayer is not its practical consequences but the metaphysical formation of a fellowship consisting of God and man” (*Worship of the Heart*, p. 35).