View PDF



Barry Gelman is Rabbi of United Orthodox Synagogues in Houston, Texas. He is President of the Houston Rabbinical Association and a Vice President of the International Rabbinic Fellowship.This article appears in issue 19 of Conversations, the journal of the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

Petitional prayer, the parts of prayer when we ask for things, plays a central role in Judaism. Of the 19 blessings in the Amidah, the centerpiece of the Jewish prayer, 13 of them are requests.

The question on the minds of many people who pray is: Does it work? It is, after all, hard to see direct results from the requests made in prayer. This reality results in people not praying or not taking prayer seriously.

Some understand the ability for prayer to change our fate as miraculous. Simply put by Ramban, Nachmanides, “All of our tefillot are miracles and wonders—but they lack overt changes in the nature of the world.” According to Nachmanides, each and every time prayer works, a miracle has occurred—nature has changed. We are not always able to recognize it. This is a very important approach; it is the approach of hope. We should never give up on the possibility that God will step in.

Others have accepted the power of petitionary prayer, but look at it a bit differently.
Have you ever gone whitewater rafting? If you have, you know that you will never be able to turn your raft around and paddle upstream—the current is simply too strong. The challenge of whitewater rafting is to avoid capsizing, to avoid the rocks (see Zalman Schacter-Shalomi, Geologist of the Soul, 91–92).

The same goes for prayer. Some will argue, like Nachmanides, that we can turn the raft around and change the course of nature. Others disagree; they say that although prayer cannot turn the raft around, it can help avoid the rocks. It can make someone’s illness more bearable and may even be able to extend life. Ultimately, though, one cannot fully control the course of the raft.

Both of these approaches accept the notion that prayer can actually change an expected outcome—either entirely or partially. For many, these opinions pose a theological problem. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments on one aspect of the challenge of prayer:

Let us suppose I pray for something. Either it is good that this happens, or it is not. If it is, then God does not need my prayer to make it happen. He will make it happen anyway because it is good and God is good. If it isn't good, then God will not bring it about, however hard I pray. The proof is none other than Moses. When Moses prayed for God to forgive the Israelites, God forgave them because God forgives. But when he prayed that he, Moses, be allowed to cross the Jordan and enter the Promised Land, God did not grant him his request. He told him to stop praying. It was not going to happen however hard or long Moses prayed. So prayer does not change God's mind in any simple sense. (http://www.rabbisacks.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/Letters-to-the-Next-Generation-2-Reflections-on-Jewish-Life.pdf)

Rabbi Yosef Albo notes that our understanding of prayer is a very high-stakes matter:

The reason which leads men to doubt the efficacy of prayer is the same as that which leads them to deny God's knowledge. Their argument is as follows: Either God has determined that a given person shall receive a given benefit or he has not so determined. If he has determined, there is no need of prayer; and if he is not determined, how can prayer avail to change God's will that he should now determined to benefit the person when he had not so determined before? For this reason...they say that prayer does not avail to enable one to receive a benefit or to be saved from evil which has been decreed against him. (Sefer HaIkkarim, Part IV:18)

I'd like to suggest another way of looking at prayer—a reinterpretation of the petitions we say, in the hope of helping people find meaning in Jewish prayer. Supplicatory prayer can be an engine to motivate. By paying attention to all of the requests we make in the Amidah, we quickly realize that the world as we know it is less than ideal. The result is that we say to ourselves, this is not the world as I wish it to be.
The initial reaction to seeing the world this way is to turn to God and say: "I don't want a world of war; rather, I want world peace. I don't want a world of sickness; rather, I want to world of health. I do not want unredeemed world...."

This is where our tradition puts us in the driver's seat. If the requests we make are for the benefit of the world and we see the world as less than good, we have a responsibility to make those things happen. Prayer is turned from a moment of vulnerability into a call for action.

When the rabbis composed petitionary prayer, they were giving us just the first step, the ability to articulate what the world should be like. The next step, the fulfillment of prayer, is our responsibility. The multitude of requests is meant, to serve as a shock to our system as the person praying realizes that while so much time has been spent pointing out particular needs ...might there be anything more that we can do?
Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik notes this in "Redemption, Prayer and Talmud Torah," where he writes:

Prayer enlightens man about his needs. ...It teaches him how to behold the vision and how to strive in order to realize this vision, when to be satisfied with what one possesses, when to reach out for more. In a word, man finds his need - awareness, himself in prayer. Of course, the very instant he finds himself, he becomes a redeemed being.

I think, however, that Rabbi Soloveitchik stops short of full redemption as he claims that a person is redeemed when he is able to form words and cry out to God. Rabbi Soloveitchik's model is the Israelite's period of slavery in Egypt. At first there was silence (absence of need awareness), then a voice, and then a word—the birth of prayer (Exodus 2:23–24).

The problem with using this as the model of prayer is that it comes from a time when the full expression of human dignity—individual self determination—was not possible. All the Israelites could hope for was divine intervention. On the other hand, in times when freedom does exist, then the ultimate act of redemption is taking action. Full redemption is symbolized by a person's freedom to take responsibility for his or herself.
A biblical model that fits this paradigm is the story of Esther and Mordechai. The entire Purim story is one of human responsibility. The moment Esther pays an unannounced visit to Ahashveirosh is the exact moment she steps up to take the fate of the Jewish people into her hands.

This approach helps explain the connection between prayer and sacrifice. The animal offering of Temple days represented the owner of the sacrifice who sacrificed himself up to God. So it is with prayer, today's stand-in for the sacrifices. Just as the animal sacrifices in the times of the Temple were brought

with the realization that owner was giving of himself, prayer must also be offered with the commitment on the part of the “owner” of the prayer, to give of himself—not as an act of self surrender but by taking responsibility for the contents of the requests.

Although Rabbi Soloveitchik believes that the greatest act of fidelity to God is the realization of helplessness, this new focus sees taking responsibility and committing to act as the ultimate measure of sacrifice—of giving to God. In this way, independence and self-sacrifice go hand in hand.

Rabbi Daniel Landes explains,

Each of the middle petitionary blessings has ethical consequences for us who pray it. Since we ask God to do these things, it must be in God’s nature to do them; and since we are made in God’s image, it must be in our nature also to do them, when we act in a Godly way. The middle blessings are, therefore, more than requests we make of God. They are equally a catalogue of our own responsibilities. Knowledge for instance, refers to Talmud Torah, Torah study, one of the greatest mitzvot because it brings all others in its wake. (My People's Prayer Book, Vol. 2: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries—The Amidah, Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Editor), 101)

Here is one example regarding the blessing of Barekh alenu et haShana haZot—Bless us this year:

Understood traditionally in the broader sense of a prayer for parnasah, an adequate livelihood, this blessing obliges us to provide others with the ability to provide for themselves. We are to help them find employment, arrange funding to help them establish businesses, provide them with loans or gifts, and welcome them in to partnerships in our own enterprises….” (My People's Prayer Book, Vol. 2: Traditional Prayers, Modern Commentaries—The Amidah, by Rabbi Lawrence A. Hoffman (Editor), 120)

If we are more sympathetic, more committed to study, and more devoted to peace and repentance after we pray, then prayer does work.

Now, we can also understand one of the most enigmatic prayer of the Ashkenazic High Holiday liturgy. U’teshuvah u’tefillah u’tsedakah ma’avirin et ro’ah haGezerah—repentance, prayer, and charity remove the evil decree. Many are uncomfortable with this prayer, and many reinterpretations are offered to resolve any discomfort. But with our interpretation of prayer, we can take it literally. These actions do remove the evil decrees, because they ignite us to act. We have

the ability and obligation to remove misery from the world. It is our prayer (and repentance and recognition of the need for charity) that energizes us, not just to complain, but to act in such a way that changes the world for the better.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel highlights the revolution that prayer is supposed to bring:

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision.” (Susannah Heschel (ed.), "On Prayer," Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays by Abraham Joshua Heschel (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997), 262.)